

THE KOVILS OF KERALA

An 18 - PETAL FRAGRANT ROSE

Covers 18 major temples situated in

*Tiruvananthapuram, Chenganur, Aranmula, Ambazhapuzha,
Sabarimalai, Ettamanur, Vaikom, Chottanikara, Kodangallur,
Irinjalakuda, Tripayar, Trichur, Guruvayur, Kozhikode,
Tiruvilwamala, Taliparamba, Trichambaram & Tiruvangad*

By

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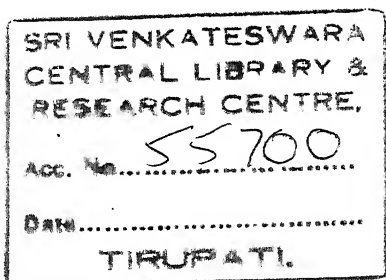
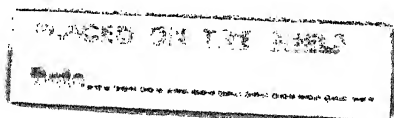
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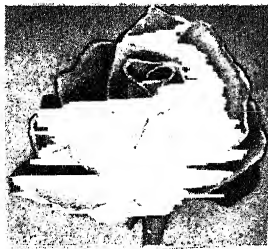
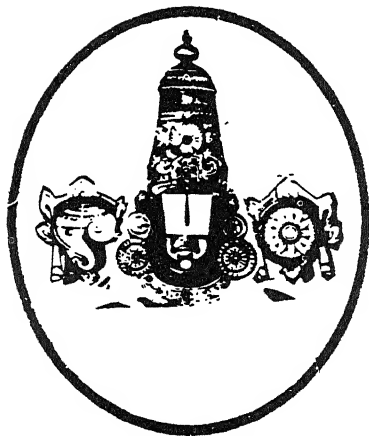
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INVOCATION



Bound by swaying palms and lazy lagoons, kerala — the holy Parasurama kshetra
Enshrines scores of Bhagavannilayas, the citadels of our Sanathana Dharma
Holding on to hoary traditions, each's mirroring uniqueness in its Kshetra
Bless longevity O Lord ! to this 18-petal-rose typifying our Vaidika dharma.

The Kovils of Kerala

Temples! The abodes of Gods! India is a land spattered with temples, from north to south and from east to west. They are of varying size and importance; yet they all cater to that burning aspiration of the human soul to communicate with the Supreme Soul of which it is an inevitable part.

Speaking about the increasing popularity of religion in the country Swami Chinmayannda says: "Famous temples are overflowing with pilgrims; new temples are mustrooning all over, temple construction (kshetra nirmaana) committees are spontaneously rising up even in the distant-most corners of shy villages, and they are honestly and sincerely struggling to find funds and material for rebuilding the neglected, and therefore dilapidated, old shrines". The heart of India throbs in its temples, in its places of worship, irrespective of the nature of the idols or ideals enshrined therein. Temples anywhere in India attract devotees from all over the country. Mountains and rivers are sacramented by religious faith and Mother Earth itself becomes a sacred symbol of worship in Hindu Ethos. Places associated with the birth and activities of Divinities become sacred spots and pilgrim centres, with the result to the Hindu mind, this land, with its innumerable association with Gods and godly acts, is a blessed one - a *Punya boomi*.

Today our country is passing through a stage of awakening to its important role in the world affairs and is in the process of consolidating its position historically, politically, culturally and spiritually to fulfil its mission in the new world of affairs, India may not have been a historical unit in the modern sense of the term, except perhaps as a slave country, but it has been a cultural unit throughout the historical times, and this cultural bond has its strength in the spiritualism that has been the life-breath of Indian Culture. As Swami Vivekananda emphatically put it, "For good or for evil, our vitality is concentrated in our religion. You cannot change it. You cannot destroy it and put in its place another".

It is only when viewed in such a context, with relation to the pre-dominant role of the temples in the individual, social and cultural life of man, that we can realise the relevance of Temple literature and the need for the dissemination of knowledge about our temples. The study of temples is not a simple matter. It requires an inquiring mind, an investigative spirit and hard work so that the subtle spiritual purpose served through that massive or diminutive structure is correctly revealed to the devoted reader, along with the significances inherent in its apparent physical complexities, of which the common man is invariably ignorant, but nevertheless, anxious to know and understand. Prof K.K. Moorthy is to be appreciated and congratulated for his successful venture into the domain of temple literature, which, instead of being literature used in the temples, are grand treatises on temples, furnishing elaborate useful information about the temples themselves.

I have had the good fortune to go through some books of Prof K.K. Moorthy on the temples of India, both in the collective and individual series of publications. Prof. K.K. Moorthy has studied each temple with reference to its antiquity, historicity, related legends and episodes, constructional and architectural peculiarities, festivals, etc., placing due emphasis on the shrine and the rituals performed. The uniqueness of each temple is faithfully highlighted, and when it comes to "The Kovils of Kerala", the author appears to be delighted with his new findings and gives an impressive record of eighteen famous shrines belonging to eighteen different places.

The 18 temples included in "The Kovils of Kerala" are selected from Thiruvananthapuram, Chengannur, Aranmula, Ambazapuzha, Sabarimalai, Ettamanur, Vaikom, Chottanikkara, Kodungallur, Irinjalakuda, Tripayar, Trichur, Guruvayur, Kozhikode, Tiruvilwamala, Taliparamba and Trichambaram. The antiquity and historicity of these temples are examined and the "Archamurthy" is given due attention. In the description of the temples there is emphasis on "Srikoil" and information on important festivals and services. For example, the description of Guruvayur temple is flavoured by spicy short write-ups on Thulabharam, Annaprasam, Chittuvilakku, Vaakacharthu, Udayasathamana Pooja, Ekadasi, Geetopadesam day, Vishu, Astami Rohini etc., giving the reader and amazing account of the services in the temple which draw large crowds of devotees throughout the year to offer worship and to conduct, witness or participate in the religious services and proceedings. The symbolic journey to the Sri Ayyappa temple on Sabari Hills, treated with vividity and vigour, is another example for the capacity of the author to detect relevant details and narrate them with full effectiveness.

The unique temple for Bharata, the brother of Sri Rama at Irinjalakuda the seat of Rama and Lakshmana at Tiruvilwamalai and other temples for Sri Rama; the Siva temples at Vaikom, Taliparamba etc. and the "Swayambhu Lingam" at Kozhikode; the Raja Rajeswari of Chottanikkara and Mother Kali of Kodungallur; the magnificent Anantha Padmanabhaswami temple at Thiruvananthapuram and a bird's eye view of Krishna temples besides Guruvayur's they all find their due places in this volume on "The Kovils of Kerala", providing valuable information and interesting reading for the religious-minded. The author has incorporated items like "Koothambaram" and "Kathakali" too, being conscious of the fact that in the past arts and learning flourished mainly inside the temples. There is provision of tourist information too regarding the locals of the temple and how it can be reached by air, rail, bus or waterways.

The book, being in English, has the added advantage that it will carry the fame of the Kerala Temples to regions outside Kerala - and outside India too.

27.4.91

(S d) C. Ammini Kutti

Editor,

Tapovan Prasad.

INTRODUCTION

This is Kerala — the land of Parasurama. Here greets our eyes the spiritualism of a kind rare and ritualism of type unique, that exhilarate even the highly evolved souls and wring rich tributes. This long strip of enchanting colourful land lying between the high Western Ghats to its East and the broad expanse of Arabian Sea to the West has many fascinating tales that keep the listeners spell-bound for hours. Nay, years, if patient hearing is assured. Tucked away in the south west corner of the sacred Ind, this small yet mighty state abounds in rich natural resources in the form of ever-green palms, exotic arecanut trees, never-withered bushes, eye-filling twisted creepers and navigable lagoons - a visible manifestation of eternal spring smiling. Amidst that exulting scenery lie the most unostentatious abodes of divinities in numbers countless with glory matchless. By their queer architectural designs and placid sculptural embellishments, they are exuding sublimity through light and sound, emanating from hymns and chants, sung by the devout priests and dedicated asthikas, in praise of the presiding deities round the clock. As they are a class by themselves, they stand as true replica of our age-old spiritualism, despite the corroding influence of materialism brought out by Marxism. There lies its commendable glory and that accounts for the auspicious foundation laid by Bhargavarama, the sixth incarnation of Lord Srimannarayana - the Protector of Universes.

Emergence of this sacred land has a fascinating back-ground - it owes its origin to the irrepressible virtuous indignation of that indomitable Sage Bhargavarama who created it at the instance of victims of Ratnakara - the Arabian sea. The legend says - once the sea advanced all on a sudden and submerged the entire region called then by the name of Jnanaranya - a favourite retreat of sages and saint-seers. The afflicted approached Parasurama, absorbed then in performing a great yagna to expiate the sin of stamping out Kshatria race. Moved by their pathetic wails, he bade the Sea-god to retreat, lest he would release Agneyastra. The terrified Sea-god meekly agreed to recede to the extent of the land covered by his axe, when hurled into the sea. The potent axe when thrown covered the land mass from Goa-Gokarna to the Cape, now called Kerala. The sea abided anon and the Munikulam forthwith retrieved the last. So it is the gift of Parasurama and the erstwhile tapobhumi of the celebrated sages like Goutama, Atri etc. Little wonder that this priceless heritage is exhibiting the covetable characteristics of head, heart, hand and soul of those illustrious high-souled maharishis, whose soul force could sink even the Everest into the darkest bowels of the ocean.

Soon after the reclamation, that immortal Parasurama addressed himself to rebuild, revitalise and reform everything connected with religion - he caused great temples built, codified hymns, created traditions and framed rules and regulations for the maintenance of the houses of worship, besides installing worshipful icons in almost all temples. Moreover, he selected and appointed priests and administrative personnel to work for Jnanarajama through prayer services and dance dramas. He travelled widely up and down of the entire state several times and lived at certain places for years, spiritualising the people. At his magnetic touch, the land became sanctified, atmosphere graced, people spiritualised, and particularly rulers divinised to the extent of dedicating their kingdoms to the Lord of Lords and

accepting the trusteeship as exemplified by the existence of Padmanabhadras in this sacred land.

Though the abodes of gods are modest in dimensions and sublime in exterior, their interior is so divinising that it electrifies the true bhaktas without exception. The austerity and piety breaking through the rituals observed and festivals conducted have become such a standard specimen that the highly developed godmen poured out their souls in ecstatic raptures when visited. Here is a gem of panegyric coming from no less a person than Gandhiji, the Father of Nation, testifying to their glory and uniqueness. It begins - "I visited temples before in North India, but had not done so in a devout spirit, and they had failed to stir me. But the majestic Kerala temples spoke to me. Every carving, every little image, every little oil-lamp had a meaning for me". Undoubtedly all is due to the alchemy of Bhargavarama. Hats off to this holy land for inheriting, imbibing and implementing, and above all retaining those ennobling traditions, although the western political thought has been making the administrative machinery scrape its exterior a little bit now and then.

What then about the people - the sons of that sacred soil? Strangely enough, spectacular achievements themselves awaited their touch and application; for, their tenacity is exemplary, enterprising ardour, unexcelled, and intellectual brilliance superb. Above all, their versatility, agility and luminosity are second to none but to themselves. So is their mobility. Hence is their presence everywhere and anywhere in some career or other in the four corners of the world. Their integrity and sincerity adorned Bharatamata's diadem with colourful diamonds. Hence winning of glittering feathers from the highest statesmen such as Jawaharlal Nehru, whose tongue used to grow eloquent whenever he met them. He honoured them fittingly with high posts and responsible jobs. Here is his ejaculation, and note the tone of his appreciation of both the land and its people. "I have left a bit of heart here, because of beauty of the land and its beautiful people. I shall come again". He went again and again and elevated them both. Into such land we are entering and with such people we are going to contact for mental elevation and physical exhilaration. Say, for spiritual communion first and last. Allow me a minute then to thank those responsible for enabling me to unlock this golden chest for your benefit.

Of the many who deserve remembrance for reverence Mr. K. Subba Rao, M.A., Editor, Saphagiri appears first. He managed to spur my magnanimity again that took the shape of order granting financial AID. But for this it would not reach your hands. So my obeisance runs faster than words. The Expert Committee steered by the intellectual luminosity of a literary genius - the refined to Executive Officer did play its noble role for releasing the grant needed. I bow to it now. Mr. Sreesan, M.A. the sub-Editor helped me with many clarifications of Kerala customs etc, being a typical son of that soil. I acknowledge my grateful thanks to him. Then comes the blessed self - C. Amminkutty, Editor, Tapovan Prasad, Madras, whose assistance in multifarious forms, such as augmenting and delimiting certain aspects of temple lore acted as the pole star from start to finish. Her scholarly opinion speaks volumes of goodwill she is enshrining in her heart and critical acumen she is endowed with. The indebtedness is so unlimited that it cannot be weighed in words. Realisation joins palms at once in an act of redemption I cherish it for ever and ever. My son Kiran and daughter Kavitha extended their fullest co-operation in all connected with typing, proof-reading etc. that they merit God's choicest boons. I pray for it. Finally, MOTHER Adiparasakthi led me to the goal illumining the path with flashes of compassionate light throughout the period of composition and publication. And

Balaji, the Lord of Seven Hills showered sustenance that fed me and the publication to reach you. I offer my soulful prostrations in number infinite to both for inspiration and subsistence but feel honestly that act is only infinitesimal against the infinitude of compassion rained on me at the hour most needed.

Well, now follow me to Tiruvananthapuram, the seat of Anantha padmanabaswamy, being the first and foremost among the Kerala temples lying in close proximity of Suchindram situated in Tamil Nadu, and incidentally I know, you know much about it in the Abodes of Gods Series No.4 - The Temples of Tamil Nadu. For those who could not be physically be present here, this slim volume unfolds all the glory before then mental eye. See and share that thrill to the like minds for effective propagation of theism - the chief objectives of this series. Hoping the request be honoured, I remain,

yours ever in service,

(sd) K.K. Moorthy

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TIRUVANANTHAPURAM

UNIQUENESS

Tiruvananthapuram. What a sonorous name! How mellifluous are its syllables!! What an enchantment its casts!!! Listen to the measured flow of its liquid cadences. Don't they resemble the basic sounds of musicology? Is it not an acc composition? Further the repetition, higher the thrill, the physical frame experiences. Now look at its distorted, twisted, defiled, Anglicised form Trivandrum. Oh! it assails the ear-drums with the harsh clatter of a crashing tin, when tread upon. Anon the hands go up unconsciously to close the ears. A standing proof of foreign contact!

Tiruvananthapuram - the old name of Trivandrum, like a gold mine exhilarates the heart and feasts the ears, at its mere mention. In the past or present. Such is the sweet music of this holy city, the august seat of Ananthapadmanabhaswamy. As is its melody, so is its glory. Nay, much more. For theists, the temple is a heaven; Vaishnavates, a Bhutalaswarga; the Maharajas of Travancore, the most venerated private Puja Mandir cum durbar hall, presided over by Sri Ananthapadmanabhaswamy to guiding their every movement, though appears in yoganidra - deep sleep reclining on the thousand headed, comfortably-coiled soft, supple fleecy lithesome body of Adishesha, he is ever wakeful to the goings-on in and out of the palace.

The sacred name - Tiruvananthapuram admits two meaningful interpretarions. It means the place of Anantha - the divine serpent couch of Sri Mahavishnu. As 'Ananta' is one of the holy names of Lord Vishnu, it applies equally to that Highest Divinity also. So it is the abode of both Adishesha and it is creator Adinarayana. Being the seat of Anantapadmanabhaswamy, in his

yoganidra posture - lying on the serpent of Anantha, this thirtha kshetra has many enviable plus points, responsible for luring theists in thousands throughout the year. It is this Ananthapadmanabhaswamy, who shrank from his 13 Km long form to present 10 feet length at the request of Divakara Muni; it is this temple, which is so firmly entwined with the fortunes of the kings of Travancore that they styled themselves as the Padmanabhadhasas, after dedicating their entire kingdom to the deity in the true spirit of scriptural injunctions; it is to this Divinity, Tulu brahmin priests alone are appointed according to divine command for performing pujas; it is this holy kshetra called Sayanadorapuram in Dwaparayuga, when Balarama visited during his Bhupradakshana, and was thriving then as a great centre of pilgrimage; it is to here, of all the shrines in the world the presiding deity is to be seen through three doors - face from the southern door, feet from the Northern and Nabhi from the middle door; it is to the making of the imposing temple flag staff, elephants performed a colossal feat of transporting the huge teak wood log without allowing it touch the ground all along from a distance 45 Km forest to the temple; it is this holy kshetra visited by many illustrious Vaishnavite saints like Nammalwar etc; it is this sacred place, elaborately described in the Skanda and Padma puranas as a highly venerated thirtha along with others like Venkatadri, Mathura etc, of immense of spiritual significance; it is this shrine's Uttupura - free feeding centres that fed thousands of brahmins throughout the year for centuries; it is this temple that withstood the onslaughts of iconoclasts several times, and emerged in greater splendour soon after the clashes were hushed; it is this temple that has been preserving old traditions in their pristine form, despite a tremendous western impact on the adorers, and it is the biggest, holiest and grandest of the Kerala temples sculpturally, architecturally, historically and reputably too.

Wrapped up thus in ethereal glory; founded on holy traditions, backed by royal patronage; eulogised in the scriptures, embedded in inscriptions, adored by saint-poets, this celebrated Anantha Padmanabhaswamy shrine is dazzling like a diamond

pendent in the necklace adorned by the Goddess of Kerala. Its rich past affords a sumptuous feast to the ears, eyes, minds and souls of the asthika community of our Punya Bharat right from its inception to the present day.

ANTIQUITY

Among the sacred books eulogising the greatness of this thirtha, Ananthasayana Mahatmya gives an exhaustive account of its origin; though the Mahabharata and Sethu Mahatmya make some references to its antiquity. According to it this region was once a thick forest, fit for penance and parnasalas. A great Vaishnavite saint by name Divakara Muni was doing penance here with an extraordinary ardour. To put him to test, Sri Mahavishnu appeared before him as a child of unearthly charms. Delighted at the lovely sight, and enraptured by his enchanting comely form, going near he fondled and caressed him like that of a doting mother. The child too reacted favourably. And then the sage requested the new - found boy to remain with him for ever. The child nodded his head, but on one condition that the sage should never abuse, or lose temper at his antics & pranks. The sage smilingly agreed and brought him up with unbounded affection outstepping even that of mothers. But one day-a fortunate day for the world, as it were, the child taking the sacred saligramam put into his mouth and started, babbling and stammering loudly. Seeing him desecrating the sacred object, the sage lost his temper and chastised him mildly. Taking the mild scolding for wild lashing, he ran away saying, "You broke the promise. So I cannot remain with you. If you want to see me, you can come to Anantakadu". Realising the folly, and unable to bear the separation, this disconsolate sage went in search of that Ananthakadu. For days and nights sans food and water, the penitent Muni searched and searched. At long last, he neared the sea shore and found his darling boy beside a big tree. In his ecstatic rapture, he ran to grab that gold mine. Alas! the child vanished into the tree. No sooner did he reach it, than the tree fell down and assumed the

shape of recumbant Mahavishnu. To his shock and surprise he found that grand form incredibly huge - 13 Km long, having his head at Tiruvallam and feet at Trippapur, the two modern towns lying to the North and South of the temple with 13 Km distance between them. The petrified sage prayed to the Lord to reduce himself to a convenient size for performing pujas. His appeal being reasonable, the Lord at once shrank to the present size and ordained that for the conduct of prayer services only Tulu brahmins be employed. It was indeed an especial honour to the sage; for, he hailed only from that place. When the sage announced the sports of the Lord, philanthropists and asthikas came in large numbers and started building temple with mini- shrines for Parivaradevathas etc. with such infinite enthusiasm that in a few years it attracted lakhs of persons. As the Lord too denied nothing to the genuine devotees, the fame spread far and wide. And what about the royal patronage? It is equal to none but to itself. Hence the development of the temple in all directions in a few decades.

BILWASMANGALA SWAMY EPISODE

There is another version popular in this region. Although it is identical - much in common with the story of Daivakara Muni regarding the finding of the recumbent form of the Lord, it differs in certain respects. This generally accepted version substitutes the popular Bilwamangala Swamiji for Dwaraka Muni and attributes the glory of the temple to his extra ordinary spiritual powers. It begins - the Swamiji was a great Krishna Bhakta and his austere life was a model of Vaishnavates. His routine prayers and meditation were of a superior type - he used to absorb himself in meditation for hours. Once his dhyana samadhi was disturbed by a comely kid in shorts - all the articles of worship were scattered with great noice. It caused him annoyance. He opened his eyes to chastise, but where was that chubby cheeked mischievous naughty boy? Disappeared! Swallowing the anger, he again sat in meditation. Yet once again, the same disarrying of articles and the same crashing sound. Incensed

ghly, he gave a blow to the child without even opening his eyes. He then turned to his shock, "I will not see you hereafter; if you want, you can see me only in the forest of Ananta". The Swamiji only then realised that it was Sri Krishna who annoyed him twice. At once he went in search of his Daivam. For days and days. His long search took him through forests and plains, but the goal was not sighted.

As luck would have it, he heard an angry mother threatening her darling son that she would throw him into Anantakadu, if he resisted naughtiness. Surprised at the mention of Anantakadu, the Swamiji implored the mother to direct him to that Anantakadu. When enlightened, he at once proceeded faster than his mind, as it were. When he reached this place, where the present temple stands, he heard the ear-splitting sounds of a crashing tree. On reaching that spot, to his rapturous joy, he found Sri Mahavishnu lying on the Vasrasirsha Nagendra. And lo! he was dumb founded at the proximity of the 13 Km long size of the Lord. He earnestly requested

the Lord to diminish himself to a convenient size for enabling him to perform pujas; he obliged. And it is the self same size, the devotees now see in the temple through three doors. Moreover, the very same wood of the fallen tree was utilised for making the icon of the Lord, which it was worshipped for centuries till the Maharaja Raghunathavarma's accession to the throne in 1729 A.D., when there was a thorough renovation of the temple including that of Lord's image.

THE PULAYA EPISODE

Yet there is one more legend tracing the origin of the temple. According to it there was a primeval forest in the area, where the present temple stands. Amidst that thick forest, there lived then a Pulaya, engaged in agricultural occupations. One day his wife heard by chance the cry of a baby of divine appearance and unusual charm. The babe was so lovely and splendid in countenance that she dared not touch it without bath. Finding none to feed nor claim it, she suckled the babe and left it under the shade of a green tree for

sometimes. When she came back, ah! What did she see there? She could not believe her eyes; for, she found a five-headed serpent sheltering the babe with its five-hooded form, from the blazing heat of the sun.

When the wonder ceased, she communicated this miracle to her neighbours. It reached the king of Travancore in no time. Deeming the place very auspicious, he ordered a temple to be built at the exact spot. And it slowly gained popularity on account of the miracles demonstrated by the presiding deity and boons showered on the adorers. Whatever may be the origin, however the place was spotted, and through whomsoever it was brought to light, one thing is certain, it was the place most dear to Srimannarayana, and fittest for tranquil repose and leisurely relaxation. And the Lord is like an incarnation of Kalpa Vriksha - granting everything to the genuine supplicants.

HISTORICITY

Although the exact date of its construction is shrouded in mystery, the historical evidence begins 1729 with Maharaja Marthandavarma's infinite munificence that almost drained the state exchequer in a year or two, as a matter of fact. His inimitable thirst for construction and renovation started even before his accession. Soon after his accession, he applied himself to the gigantic task of restoring most of the dilapidated portions. The construction of garbha griha along with making of the Lord's icon was given top priority. The image, using as many as 1200 salagrams, specially brought from afar moulded into a shape with a particular kind of mortar, made of special compounds and coated with a paste, prepared from molasses and mustard. It was indeed an ace architectural feat unique in conception, combination and construction. And a specimen of the exquisite piece of perfect craftsmanship! This superb huge icon adorned with garlands and dazzling silks with Brahma seated atop the lotus rising from the

navel affords a royal banquet to the eyes, and transports the viewers to Vaikunta. Next, the imposing Ottakkal mantap lying just opposite the Moolavirat received his magnetic touch. This 20 feet square Mantap was built out of a single gigantic granite slab. Another colourful feather to his cap! The main Eastern gopuram work which was begun as back as in 1566 was taken up and completed upto the fifth storey. Another colossal feat was the building of Sribalipura, the awe-inspiring rectangular corridor encircling the main mandir for which the services 1000 masons, 6000 labourers and 100 elephants were utilised. And lo! this supreme specimen of artists' superb craftsmanship was materialised in barely 7 months. The making of flag staff is another superb feat that brought him undying fame, and left him as the pole star among the builders of Kerala temples.

THE TEMPLE

This architectural piece of superb craftsmanship, occupying a spacious 7-acre-land lies on an elevated part of the city and is visible to the visitors from miles afar. Surrounded by massive prakaras with a tall 100 feet high 7-storeyed tower of pyramidal shape, it faces the east, and has a flight of broad stone steps to reach the sannidhi. The elaborately and intricately sculptured pouranic figures adorning the tower are a treat to the connoisseurs and detain them for hours, whereas the asthikas bow to them seeing living gods in them. Crossing the portal, we enter the broad open oblong corridor, supported by 324 pillars, called the walk of the God's procession. The pillars and the ceiling are fittingly beautified with excellent sculptures. The grand 80- foot-high circular golden flag staff lying at the end of this covered walk is adorned with the image of Garuda, the Lord's Vehicle. Kulasekhara Mantap bearing the exquisite sculptures lies to its south. Then comes the two-storeyed rectangular inner shrine richly ornamented with gables - the characteristic feature of the Kerala architecture. Its outer walls are beautified with mural painting, depicting many legendary tales. There are several

minishrines dedicated to adorable gods and goddesses, like Krishna, Sastha, Siva, Narasimha, Vyasa, Kshetrapala, Rama, Lakshman, Sita etc. Lord Ganesh's icon with its prominent pot belly, matching his diminutive stout limbs attracts everyone most. The sculptors' artistry in the making of Vishnu image with four hands and Lakshmi sitting under the canopy of tree peeps at beholders and bends heads in homage to the Lord and the makers too. For this and more, credit goes to the illustrious Maharaja Marthandavarma, whose devotion is second to none. To be true, history has not so far produced another specimen king of Kerala to stand beside or behind him. He is a unique gem of purest ray scene, dazzling among the royal patrons of art and architecture. The cause of his matchless passion for construction and faith in God, and love of fellowmen deserves reverent study.

MARTHANDA VARMA'S PATRONAGE

He was, as name suggests a dauntless warrior of peerless military prowess. Soon after coronation, he launched a large scale military campaign for territorial expansion, particularly against the impudent roaring local petty lions and annexed with grace and ease every territory, and left them as toothless wild cats. Expansion, as desired was materialised and his kingdom sweeled upto cochin. Soon after the digvijaya yatra, he embarked upon the Dharma Prachara yatra on a spectangular level like that of immortal Asoka Mourya, and in an exemplary manner at it. He construed and inferred, rightly too, that power, wealth, knowledge come to an individual as a reward, when he accepts to be a trustee of God's wealth and moreover the gifts of God find justification, leading to the culmination of reaping a bumper harvest of bliss. Illumined thus, he came to momentous decision of dedicating his whole kingdom to his family deity Sri Ananthapadmanabhaswamy. The unrest surfacing in certain quarters of the conquered kingdom, adding uneasiness to his perturbed conscience, the aftermath of the war, hastened him to the holy presence of the presiding deity to placing

his sceptre and crown at the feet of the Lord as a symbol surrendering all his possessions and rights by kingdom. As a mark of total, unconditional surrender, he placed his sword on the steps of the sanctum sanctorum and declared that he would thenceforward act as the Lord's vassal, and be called Padmanabhadasa only. Hasn't he proved himself the modern version of Bharat? And ordained that his successors too would act likewise. This verily perched him higher than Bharat to speak the truth. What a decision! How unique is his renunciation!! Has any nation followed that suit!!! Will future produce such another!!!! Doubtful! At once he made conch as the emblem of the state and used for badges and coins. This unparalleled decision was whole-heartedly accepted in the royal household, and later it became a tradition and was accepted by the succeeding kings with mute submission. And some of the members of the royal family never took food until and unless worshipping the Lord at the shrine. So infinite and implicit was the faith that the princely members turned model princes to the millions of princes. That miraculous change in this out-look manifested itself in several ways - he began the constructional work of the temple on such grand scale that it emerged soon as a marvellous shrine attracting global attention. To be precise, he glorified it, and it divinised him in turn. His humanism, and patronage of arts too are of unearthly in charter and content.

FESTIVALS

The temple celebrates two annual festivals on a grand scale in such an impressive way that the whole Vaishnavite community living all over India participates lustily, besides common folk in lakhs. Each is a 10 day festival - one falling in the month of Meenam, corresponding to March - April, and the other in the month of Tula i.e. October month. Both begin with Kodiyatram - flag - hoisting ceremony and end with huge processions of deities, participated by lacks of people, including the Maharaja and his family members with a zeal infinite and pomp, unusual. During these festivals, the

Veetta-hunting and arattu-immersing procession are of great significance. They are celebrated in accordance with sastric injunctions. Their symbolical meaning is deep and embodies universal truths - any spectacle becomes perfect and breathes life, if only the actors and spectators are brought together and participate with equal zeal. And by harmonious unification of the mover and the onlooker, the spectacle reaches perfection - comes to a full circle. This art principle is achieved during these festivals, when the Maharaja taking the role of the protector kills the demon standing for evil. On the ninth day of the festival, a big make-believe setting for the mock-hunt, befitting the pageant is erected in front of the Sundaravilasam palace fort at Trivandrum, where the climax of the myth is enacted. The demon is shot at by the Maharaja with an arrow. The light and sound effects ably produced, make the episode real and the spectators enjoy it to the maximum. The procession of the deities though reaches the temple at the end, the deities are not be taken to their seats without the purificatory bath. Does not God, when descend to the sinful world get defiled? As the Utsavamurthis suffered pollution thus, they should be purified before resuming their original position. Hence the ceremonial bath on the tenth day. The purificatory ritual is performed to the images of Sri Padmanabha, Krishna and Narasimha at Sankhamukhan situated at the edge of the Arabian sea. This is another fascinating sight for the theists to enjoy the colourful spectacle of the procession of deities, escorted by the royal family, and lacs of bhaktas going along the 5 Km long road. These two though not come near the Dasara celebrations at Mysore in pomp and splendour, they exceed it in the observance of traditions. The priests attach supreme significance to every item of the rites observed from start to finish. They appear conservative in several of their practices, but seen through the eyes of traditional purists, they are justified. Modernity is totally banished from the precincts of the holy temple. The entire atmosphere starts breathing antiquity and orthodoxy from the very moment opening of temple doors to the closing. Certainly, modernity feels irked at certain traditions like admission of males with dhoties and bare

chest, yet the antiquity shirks not its rigidity, nor thinks of introducing any flexibility, even in the case of the highest ruling authority, if he visits for darsan. As nothing is hate-worthy in the general scheme of creation, respecting the traditions alone paves the way for harmonious kinship and exemplary bliss between the visitors and the authorities.

Endure it! And get emancipated!!

KOVALAM - THE BEACH PARADISE OF KERALA

Just at a little distance of 14 km off Trivandrum, Kovalam the world renowned beautiful beach spreads its vast expanse of enchanting, soft, sunbaked shimmering sand dunes to enthrall the tourists and spiritualist alike at a mere glance. With boundless blue of the Arabian sea raising in endless surf in front and exquisite stalwart greentufted swaying palms behind, this magnificent haven of Sun, surf and sea casts a spell on the visitors. And lulls their senses with never-ceasing roars and ever- surging hisses of the waves. As if to adorn this marvellous Nature-made spectacular paradise, there lie many grand buildings, the architectural mod specimens giving asylum to rest seeking bodies and agitated souls.

A well-equipped modern Health centre nestled in the shady grove is a star attraction due to carrying on multifarious activities like attending to the decadent or decaying physique, enlightening on the dynamics of Yoga and rejuvenating the aching bodies with Ayurvedic massages and oil-baths, in addition to lifting the soul with the colourful performance of dance drama - Kathakali, the unique luscious Kerala dish to the eyes and ears. Watching spectacles of the sports of the Sea-god, the visitors feel enthused to taking to swimming, surfing and cruising. And lo! facilities for such ventures as catamaran riding, swimming and water sports await their bidding too. All these luxuries are made available to the visitors lodged in the grand air-conditioned cottages called Kudis, Kovalam Hotel, Halcyon castle, built on the beautifully curved beach-line affording a panoramic view of both ocean line before and the intruding hill range behind. Provision for accommodation in the luxury suites with conference halls and mini-parties is an additional attraction for business magnets and ministerial dignitaries.

Hence a miss-not place either for sight-seeing or mind- lifting.

BHAGAWATHI OF CHENGANNUR

UNIQUENESS

"Inscrutable are the ways of God...", Exclaims the seer in ecstatic rapture; "Admit first thy insignificance against God's infinite might for a shower of bliss" exhorts the godman with conviction born out of total realisation; "Behold the miracles and learn to retrieve the Paradise lost"; preaches the Acharya, obstructing the impudent arrogance falling into the abyss etc. - all these well-wishers, of course, are from the cream of intellegentsia renowned for their humanism and are striving ever with one aim, one voice, and one goal - "Sarvesamastha Sanmagalanibhavanthu". But the irony of it, some highly educated, West-oriented and best placed are looking down upon theism; and denigrating the adorable, rather pooph-poophing the ancient traditions under the garb of some "ISM". And what is more, trying to put the Divinity in the test tubes. What a fun! In the end, poor creatures find the tables turned - the highest wisdom concentrated, again in the test tubes are endorsing the existence of that mightiest, invincible, invisible, infinite, immutable power. Openly and unconditionally at it. But some half-baked, perverted publicity-mad psuedo-brains are continuing to label the Deism as inconsistent, absurd, insane, incongruous, non-sensical stupidity worthy to be consigned to dust-bin. Yet theism is sprouting, flowering, progressing, and increasing. In strength and sustaining power. Above all, it is demonstrating through miracles of infinite variety, changing the static into dynamic, or reverting it to original form or position.

These miracles have successfully ended in the conversion of the remorseless, haughty, ego-centred, debased nature into ever smiling, all-blissful divine humanism, spilling peace and grace at

every step, sweetness in every word, and light through the benign broad eyes. Even the deriding devilish ones too unconsciously gaping bent heads down; but some stale, colourless, urnipe fruits are still rotting in their decomposed debris. It is for such, in some sacred shrines, the All-Compassionate Omnipotent God is producing some miracles, like emptying gallons of beverage everyday by the stone as seen in the Narasimhaswami temple at Mangalagiri, menstruating by the panchaloha female image periodically at Changannur etc. If enumeration goes on, it consumes tons of paper and barrels of ink. One with only a few details is found expedient at this stage, and that single is enough to drive home the truth of the existence of superior power that alone sets in motion every object of the creation, nay, even the Creator supposed to have unlimited sway over all, and all of all.

This incidentally takes us to the famous pilgrimage town of Chengannur, where Mother Parvathi and Her Lord Parameswar - the Creator and Creating force are enshrined in an imposing shrine, popularly known as Mahadev temple, lying on the Ernakulam - Quilon section of the Southern Railway, in the Aleppy district of Kerala State. Here the panchaloha idol of Mother Parvathi is menstruating to the wonderment of sceptics periodically with unbroken regularity at it. Moreover, it has several distinctive features that narrates many episodes, all but proving the positiveness of the prevelance of the Supreme Power, responsible for the moment of a single blade of grass in the world. It is at this Punya thirtha, Mother's Sati's reproductive organ fell, when her corpse was cut into pieces by Sri Mahavishnu with his Sudarsana Chakra while being carried by Lord Siva that turned out to be the prime cause of periodical bleeding by the panchaloha image. It is here the Swaymbhu linga of Lord Parameswar is worshipped in the fore of the shrine, and the Mother in the name of Bhagavati at the rear, i.e. both the august deities in one place, yet in separate independent shrines; it is here the Adidampatis dwelt for one month after their wedding to fulfil the promise given to Agasthya, who was staying there on the Sondri to keep the tilting earth in equilibrium; it is here

the chaste Kannaki did tapas after the disastrous event of burning Madurai, consequent on the death of her Lord Kovalan; it is to celebrating of Triputtu festival, colonel Munro, the Resident Diwan of Travancore donated Rs.700/- in 1811 A.D. and allowed the continuance of the same ritual every year at his expense, which is in force even today; it is to the building of this temple, the famous architect Perunthachan - renowned as Kerala Viswakarma was appointed, and who deliberately incorporated certain forbidden practises, so was punished fittingly by the presiding deity; it is here in the dim past, thousands of Nambudri families brought by Bhargava Rama lived and carried on the Vedic activities in uninterrupted continuity; it is here lies the much-hallowed Saktikunda thirtha, where a homa for Mother Parvathi was performed; it is here the offering of Pushpanjali ritual is made for the fulfilment of desires; it is the west Nada of this temple deemed an august spot for taking oath; it is here in this campus, a sacred stone is relieving fear from a snake bite by mere standing on it and praying; it is the deity of this shrine that wards off the evil spirits and it is this Mokshapuri that enshrines the images of Parvathi and Parameswar, installed one behind the other in the same Srikol - Lord Siva facing the East and Mother Parvathi the west, and are worshipped with equal fervour proving the existence of perfect equality between Siva and Sakti, a unique feature in temple architecture, though literature abounds in abundant proof to this truth.

Enshrining with such several breath-taking wonders; beautified by excellent sculptural marvels; eulogised in the scriptures, sanctified by the penance of Agasthya; propitiated by the English dignitaries, along with permanent annual donations; honoured fittingly by history with a covetable place and ardently adored by millions of devotees since the solemnisation of the wedding of Parvathi and Parameswar, this thirtha kshetra is conferring solace and salvation to the contentment of asthikas in a unique way.

Associated with Uma and Maheswar's sports and Sage Agasthya's tapas, this kshetra occupies a place in several legends, and hence many versions are available with variations, though aiming at the glorification of the presiding deities through episodes of unearthly splendour and glamour. The wedding of Parvathi and Parameswar is the Principal cause of Agasthya's advent to Sonadri, an integral part of Sahyadri range of mountains. Lord Parameswar felt elated at the sight of the entire Devaganas - Mukkoti devatas at Kailas on his wedding day, but found to his dismay the earth was tilting towards the North due to the presence such huge congregation at one time. And sure the south would be lifted aloft resulting in a great catastrophe soon. To avoid that disaster, he solicited the celebrated sage Agasthya to go to South and stay there for maintaining the equilibrium of the raising earth. Finding Agasthya's discontent at missing the auspicious celestial wedding, he promised to meet him with his consort in his hermitage itself after the marriage, besides bestowing the gift of divine sight to see everything from his own seat itself. Satisfied at this unexpected fortune, Agasthya moved anon to the South, humbling the Vindhyas on his way and settled down at Sonadri being the ideal, sequestered spot for meditation and ascetic life. And this Sonadri, if translated into Malayalam it becomes Chenkunni and if 'Ur' is added to indicate town, it turns out Chenkunnur - its corrupt form being Chengannur perched in records and popular in common parlance.

As promised, Lord Parameswar visited with Parvathi at his asram and blessed him for doing that Jagadodharan Karya. While staying there, Parvathi had her menses. The divine couple, therefore, dwelt there till the purificatory bath. To keep this alive in memory a temple wash built later, and the image of Lord Parameswar and Parvathi were installed and worshipped with reverence due. To mark this event, Triputtu Arattu - bathing ceremony is conducted regularly since then. On account of the occurrence of this here, the Panchaloha

Vigrah representing her figure menstruates even today. So the tradition is maintained with great reverence. Normally the priest who attends to the Nirmalayam - removing of the previous day's flowers etc. at the opening of the temple doors examines the petticoat of the deity. If he finds the signs of bleeding on the petticoat, it is sent to the priest's house for confirmation by the chief lady - the priest's wife. On confirmation, the Srikoil is kept closed for three days. During this period, a small Vighraha is installed in a secluded room, and regular worship is offered to it. On the fourth day Triputtu Ceremony - bathing ritual is performed with great fanfare. The image then is taken out to the nearby Pampa river on a female elephant. Thousands of devotees, particularly ladies attend this. The returning of the deity to the temple is awaited by Lord Parameswar mounted on elephant. Receiving her at the portal, they go back to their respective seats. Then regular pujas are conducted. This is a monthly occurrence, yet asthiks attach great sanctity and celebrate it with utmost devotion. If nasthiks belittle it, or deliberately denigrate, they are punished forthwith. History with abundant evidence recorded the consequences of desecration of this practice along with names and dates. Besides, the petticoat that bears the marks of blood is sold in auction, and the bidders being many including intellectuals and officials, it fetches thousands of rupees. Among the buyers, one may be surprised to find the names of ex- president V.V. Giri and Sir. C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer to quote a few.

MUNRO EPISODE

This happened around 1811 A.D., when the temple was under the administration of Travancore Maharaja. The person involved was a European by name Col. Munro, who was officiating as the Resident Divan of Travancore. During his checking of this Temple accounts, he laughed at the item of expenditure incurred on Triputtu - the purificatory bath ritual conducted monthly. Deeming the monthly bleeding of the metal idol was absurd, he cut out the

provision with his official pen - he scoffed at the meaningless practice, but the Goddess chuckling to herself, as it were, decided to make the officer bite the dust for, on the same day, the Mother menstruated. According to Munro's ruling ceremonies - rituals were suspended. Devout theists despaired. Priests cursed their fate under breath. Mother then demonstrated her might. Her target, of course was the alien. Soon the officer's wife experienced excruciating pains due to heavy bleeding, started on the day of suspending the centuries-old practice. And his children too took ill. Attempts - doctors could not bring relief. He consulted astrologists but learnt to his stupifaction that it was due to his atheistic action - stopping of Triputtu ceremony. Better counsel prevailed, and he ordered for its resumption. Needless to prolong, there was instant stopping of the bleeding of his wife. Children too become alright. The penitent officer at once decided to donate a sum of Rs.700/- the amount spent usually for it every year from his own savings. And it is said that it is being received from his successor even today. Indeed a great punishment! Better atonement!! Best historic proof!!!

Another! In the recent year, one Tahsildar of Changannur, a pious officer, performed in an elaborate manner a 28-day-Utsavam with pomp and splendour. During this period, the Mother had menses. The officer with a view to completing the Utsavam as planned, turned a blind eye to the occurrence and hushed it up using his official powers. Could he hoodwink the omnipresent MOTHER? Would she endure this desecration? Result: His wife had profuse bleeding. Unusual and Untimely too. Enlightened by Munro's experience, he offered special pujas as an act of atonement. His wife got relief. So the belief gained currency and fortified the potency of the MOTHER and respect for age-old belief. Would any heckling 'ISM' blink at this? With what could it measure that divine sport? It is not literature to set aside labeling it as fevered flight of imagination, but pure history recorded with distilled facts and dates at it. Scepticism or agnosticism must remove the coloured glasses soon; for getting better perspective for their own benefit first.

THE AFFERMATH OF SATI'S IMMOLATION

There is another version, accounting for the bleeding of the archamurthi in the shrine. This pouranic episode too has received greater respectability along with acceptability with mute-submission.

According to it, when Sati immolated herself in Yogagni at the ruthless humiliation meted out to her by none but her father, Lord Siva descended right at the Yagna Sala and put the place and people to total destruction, that went beyond recognition. Placing the corpse on his shoulders, he started Thandava Nrithya in such frenzied fury and wild excitement that the world and people shook and shivered to an incredible magnitude that Lord Mahavishnu appeared on the scene and thwarted the Mahapralaya by cutting the corpse into several pieces with his potent Sudarsan disc. The fragments fell at several places throughout the length and breadth of India. And each place became a much-hallowed Saktipita of ethereal significance, universal veneration and perpetual visitation. Among the fragments that flew and fell at different places, Mother Sati's Yoni - reproductive organ fell here at Chengannur. And that accounts for the menstruation of the Principal image - Mother Parvathi since then. Which outsteps which in credibility is not the lesson to be sought for from the two, but unconditional total mute acceptance of the divine power, permeating every inch of the sacred place is the important point that alone beckons the theists for visitation and adoration. Aren't the sports of the Divinity mysterious?

THE TEMPLE

This sacred temple built on a vast six-acre land is deemed one of the biggest of its kind by Kerala standards. It has a massive prakara and a tall three-tiered tower over the Gateway, facing east, and another on the west. Its architectural beauty is of high order and

detains the visitors with its beauty. Crossing the Mahadwar, when proceeded further you see the Anakottal - elephant shed. Next comes Kuttambalam in front of which lies the tall, brass plated flag staff, then Balikalpura leading to the imposing Mukhamamtap. Finally the circular Srikoil enshrining the images of Lord Siva in the front, facing the east and Mother Parvathi facing west, just behind in the same garbhagriha but separated by a passage. This is one of the distinctive features of the temple that indeed marks it out from the rest of the temples found anywhere in India. The roofing covered with copper plates is quite huge and beautiful sloping steeply downwards. The outer walls, the wooden pillars of Srikoil and the eastern mandapam are adorned with fine wood carvings; the craftsmanship is so exquisite and impressive that Marthanda Varma the famous builder of Sri Padmanabhaswamy temple employed them all after visiting the temple. Their skill is superb and the pouranic stories they carved are life-like in expressions, style and design.

THE IMAGES

The Swayambhulinga is of three feet in height and wears a forlorn look, recalling his separation from the Sati after her immolation in the court of Dhaksha. This linga is adorned with Swarna Kavacha, fashioned into Ardhanariswara form. It looks extremely beautiful and resplendent that joins the palms of the bhaktas at a mere single sight.

The image of Parvathi called popularly Bhagawati was originally a granite one, but it was replaced by a beautiful two and half a feet high panchaloha vigraha. The Mother is exceedingly beautiful with her enchanting lotus-petalled eyes and smiling countenance. She reveals with two hands - one in Varadamudra and the other Abhaya. Decorated with several invaluable dazzling jewels and resplendent silks, she casts an enchantment that the bhaktas rivet their gaze at her for long. The numerous brass lamps burning bright heighten her loveliness to million fold and make the viewers oblivious of this world for a while. It becomes verily an unforgettable

experience to avail the darsan of both Gouri and Shankar in one and the same Srikoil, moreover one behind the other. There are many Upadevathas like Ganesh, Nilasiva, Sthalcesan and Dharma sastra in different palces receiving veneration. Near the western gopuram, there is a mini-shrine for Krishna with Ganga and Gangodhar enshrined as Upadevathas. Another visit-worthy place in the complex is the giant peepal tree grown tall. It lies on the right side of west Nada and it is worshipped by the victims of Sunyam and evil spirits. There is belief that evil spirit flees off, no sooner ^{than} a nail is driven into the trunk of the tree. Hence the crowds throughout. This temple like the shrine of Guruvayur is famous for the celebration of marriages, annaprasana etc. and they are conducted in the west Nada of the temple and here congregate people in large numbers both for performing bhajans and offering special pujas. A ritualistic puja called Pushpanjali is very popular here. It is akin to archana with a difference. If it is offered for 41 days regularly, the worshipper reaps several merits. Many hope-lost, desperate bhaktas gained solace, and prospered well with this Pushpanjal offerings.

ODDITY OF CONSTRUCTION

Mention must be made of certain peculiar constructional features found in the temple, and some of them are deliberately made with motives. The Mukha mandapam, in front of Lord Siva's Koil is purposely built in a lower level to preventing the occupants from having direct view of the Presiding deity. Another! The Kuttambalam too is built right in front with the same motive of obstructing the direct view of the Lord. This is due to unhealthy and malicious intentions of the builder Perunthachan, the celebrated builder deemed to be the Viswakarma of Kerala. When entrusted with the work of building, he arrived here by boat on the river Pampa. To his great shock he found on the surface of water, flowers, darbha, banana leaves etc. to such large quantity, indicating the countless persons engaged in temple for doing pujas. During his stay, he found the dominance of Nambudris, and there were

thousands of families thriving, depending on the temple. He purposely introduced certain ominous designs to spell disaster on the brahmin community. The building of Mukha Mandapam in a lower level etc. really brought ruination and thousands of families were reduced to only 20 to 30 in a few years. Was he really profited by such evil intentions? No. Retribution came in the form of a sharp, big chisle which slipping from his hand while working atop fell direct on the head of the dearest son, who died at once. And the son as the word went round far surpassed that Viswakarma in work and skill.

THE SANCTITY OF WEST GOPURAM

Among the other uniques the temple is deservedly famous, for the west Nada deserves mention. On the right side of the west Gopuram there is a hole and it has an exotic episode to narrate. It is supposed to contain a venomous serpent inside, and one is afraid of taking oath inserting finger into it. If he utters lies while the finger in the hole, the serpent bites him and instant death follows. So one is mortally frightened to take oath at this place in this method. Liars met with instantaneous deaths, hence the very mention of west Nada of Chengannar strikes terror into the minds of liars. Its origin is quite interesting-it appears once a fake Vishavaidya from Tamil Nadu went there and boasted that none would beat him in curing snake bites. Unfortunately a twelve year boy, the lone survivor renowned for Vishavaidhya heard it and reported it to his fond mother. She was crest fallen; for it was dishonour to her own town, and her husband, whose mantrikasati was unparalleled. In the same night the boy had a dream and he was provided with a small pipe by the Naga King himself with sufficient guidance to tackle the bogus Tamilian Mantrika.

On the next morning the boy went to temple and before a huge number of bhakatas assembled for prayer, he loudly proclaimed whether the Tamilian was really poison-proof and was fearless of snakes as boasted on the previous day. The falsifier was at his wits end, yet false prestige goaded him to keep up his statement.

Then the boy unleashed the serpent from the pipe. And lo! a fierce black Cobra emerging from the pipe advanced towards the deceiver with fangs dilating. Shivering all over he begged the boy to save him. Taking pity on him, the boy bade the snake withdraw into the pipe. It did. The Tamilian mantrika to atone the sins of his overbearing arrogance deposited all his paraphernalia-medicines in a pit near Kuttambalam and covered it with a stone slab before his departure. That very stone lies even today serving a better purpose. Standing upon it, if one soulfully prays to the Lord Pannagabhushana, he will be relieved of the effects of snake bites. The Lord always protects the Saranarthas in all possible ways at every moment. Later the boy made a hole in the wall of the West Gopuram and installed the pipe into it. It is this hole used now for oath taking. The liar accepts the truth, if he is dragged to the place for confession. Though centuries passed by, the miracle is still in force. So the Chengannur west Mada has become a nightmare to the bogus people, who now prefer confession to swearing at that point in that fashion. "Inscrutable are the ways of God", escapes the lips of any from among the bystanders. "Curb your rising insignificance", utters a budding godman, "Emulate that urchin" sermonises an evolving Pravakta. This is yet another miracle that this miraculous temple is displaying to prove the authenticity of the mightiest power, instrumental in deciding the destiny of the insignificant, million trillion billionth fragment of a proton that man is, before the Himalayan immensity that supreme Lord is. The 'ists' if open their eyes wide to catch a full glimpse of Viswarupa of the Lord, it can be presumed, they turn Arjuns to prostrate and circumambulate the universes times million for the gift of clear perspective of the Creator and the Creative Force here embedded in the images of the Presiding dieties of this matchless much-hallowed miracle temple of Kerala.



ARANMULA PARTHASARATHI

PREFACE

That ineffable charm of Balagopala, whose boyhood sports and mischievous pranks reverberating the Mathura Mandalam - Gokulam, Brindavanam and Repalli entertained the fortunate contemporaries of the eighth incarnation of Lord Srimannarayan is not only confined to the Srikoil of Guruvayur in Kerala State, but is hypnotising the bhaktas when they enter several temples dedicated to Srikrishna. Among them the temples of Aanmula with angry Parthasarathi, Ambazhapuzla, with flute playing Krishna and Trichambram with hungry Krishna are exceedingly popular and tremendously awe-some for multifarious uniques they are embodying, and hence are drawing a steady influx of pilgrims over centuries and centuries. Each is famous for representing one aspect or the other of the myriad manifestations of Lord Srikrishna in addition to following its own traditions - prayer services and festivals. That Yadunandan's multi-dimensional glory emanating from every inch of those sacred kshetras deserves indispensable visitation and soulful prostration. For a cursory glance, only the unique features of each are dealt with for the primary reason that a mere mention, or acquaintance of their plus points certainly prepares people for a visit and blessings.

UNIQUENESS

Of the glorious roles played by Srikrishna Bhagawan, the role of the celebrated charioteer alone sheds adequate light on his multi-factered personality, particularly that facet of statecraft that

will live a full life for ever and ever and ever. It is on the Kurukshetra battle ground alone Bhagavadgita - the song celestial - the Bible of Humanity emerged and fulfilled the purpose of his incarnation. It is here he revealed himself in the role of Gitacharya to inspire mankind to stick on the twin ideals of action and renunciation - the two eyes of Hinduism; it is here besides driving the chariot, he jumped into the battle field in his fiercest aspect to set limits to human invincibility that must bend before that Omnipotent, who creates, operates, and destroys all the earthly superlatives. The unprecedented, irrespressible, insurmountable wrath that surfaced is represented in the archamurthi of this famous shrine. Credit goes to that indomitable Bhismapitamaha for creating conditions and infuriating Krishna to assume this formidable shape and express that emotion; it is this place incidentally associated with the age-old water carnival called Vallomkali held during Onam; it is to this place the idol installed by Savyasachi Arjuna was brought from Nilakkal; it is this deity ready to fight for manavabhudaya readily breaking the promise made; it is here a certain Nambudri offered a great feast to the Lord once coming here by sailing from a far off place and a tradition called Tiruvonachilavu is observed every year over years; it is here a grand feast called Vallasadya is offered to the deity after the Snake Boat race; it is this deity who blesses the barren women with children and in the south there are thousands of beneficiaries exemplifying this truth and it is to this temple children-blessed by the Lord come in their thousands every year in the month of January and boisterously participate in a special festival celebrated, ending with burning of dried leaves and dancing lustily around it.

Renowned thus for enshrining the images of Parthasarathi that fulfilled the purpose of his incarnation - supression of adharma and upholding of dharma, building up of the tradition of water carnival; celebrating of an auspicious festival every year with the endowment made by a bhakta and conducting Vallasadaya feast, this place has been attracting the bhaktas particularly Alwars over

centuries, as one of the 108 Vaishnava Kshetras mentioned in the scriptures.

HISTORICITY

According to legend, this sacred image, of Srikrishna worshipped now in the Srikoil was installed by asamanasura Arjuna was at Nilakkal, but was brought here under extra-ordinary conditions. According to belief, the Pancha Pandavas visited Kerala temples during their pilgrimage after making Parikshit as the emperor of Bharat. Gratified at the sublimity pervading the entire Parasurama kshetra, they decided to install each a deity at places of their own choice. Accordingly they installed temples at Someswaram, Ivarmatm, Kottakurussi etc. All on the banks of the river Pampa. Arjuna chose Nilakkal for enshrining the image of Parthasarathi, as it was that form alone blessed them with spectacular victory. They did. The Nilakkal of those days was sparsely populated. The scarcity of water and attacks by Marava marauders posed eternal threats to their existence. So they made an exodus. Being theists, they carried the idol with them wherever they went. Lord Krishna, pleased with their devotion led them on the banks of Pampa in the guise of a brahmachari and at long last selected the present Aranmula as the ideal place for their permanent settlement. As they carried the idol in a raft made of six bamboo pieces to this place; it went by the name of Aranmula - 'aaru' being six and 'mula' meaning bamboo in Malayalam language. Later, it stick on to it, despite growing in all directions with many changes including transport.

ARCHAMURTHI

The archamurthi worshipped here resembles that of Srikrishna's form assumed at a time when Bhishma pitamaha turned invincible. A major portion of the army fell during Bhishma's nine - day generalship. Panic enveloped thick and fast then the Pandavas

grew restless. Army too lost hope. At this critical juncture, Srikrishna exhorted the unwilling Arjuna to kill the grandsire for sure victory. But Arjuna was in a dilemma. He had been fighting only to obey the injunctions of Krishna from the beginning; for he did not like blood-shed, nor wear the blood- stained crown. For Krishna that was the only one chance to fulfil the purpose of his incarnation - dushtasamhar. So he jumped from the chariot in all fury like the hungry lion on the corpulent elephant. His anger is indescribable, nor the ethereal charm that gushed out at that critical time. Seeing the unusual beauty of that highest divinity, Bhishma prayed in such ecstatic rapture that it is adorning the literature with a unique grace. He welcomed Krishna to sever his head, since he knew that death at the hands of Bhagavan is nothing but instant salvation. Just then Arjuna rushing to Srikrishna appealed to withdraw, for it was his duty to fight, and Krishna's to drive the chariot as agreed upon in the beginning. If Krishna were to kill, both of them would become laughing stock for not keeping up their word, though they were the only fittest persons. The form of the jumping Krishna from chariot with Sudarsan in his hand is captivating and that very same form is captured in the archamurthi of this temple. The singularity of the situation ended in granting of the boons as desired by Arjuna and Bhishma - withdrawing from the scene as Arjuna prayed, and death of Bhishma. Hence the belief that praying to this Mulavirat ensures certainty of fulfilling of desires. And it proved true in almost all cases. Hence the unending streams of bhaktas who surrender themselves at the sacrosanct feet of the Lord to guide the chariot of their life sans pitfalls as it did in the case of Arjuna.

PARTHASARATHI FED BY NAMBUDRI

Among the millions of adorers liberated by this Parthasarathi, the episode of a Battatiri affords a reverent reading. There lived a pious Nambudri in Kattoor, very near to Aranmula. He was a high souled jnani for whom the scriptures were his life breath. He lived in

them and followed every injunction with unsurpassed devotion. He used to feed a brahmin on the auspicious Tiruvonam-day every month, treating the guest as God - Athithi devo bhava. Unluckily once in the month of Chingom falling in August - September he could not find a guest, tried however much. As he started self-reproaching, there appeared a brahmin mysteriously before his house. He took him home and fed to his satisfaction- observing all the rituals due including the washing of his feet. In addition, he prayed to the guest to visit him again next Chingom on the same day to bless him, but the reply was that he could be seen at Aranmula temple only. So saying, he vanished as he appeared. Who was this mystery man? Even an infant answers instantly, doesn't he?

Next year the jubilant Numbudri taking with him 51 paras of rice and other requisite stuff for cooking, sailed to Aranmula and offered pujas to the Lord on a grand scale meeting all the expenses incurred for it. The beat - thoni - carrying him and the materials for feeding, were later called Tiruvonachilavu thoni. The tradition of the boat carrying materials for Puja and feeding is continued even today, for the devout brahmin denoted all his lands to the temple for conducting this annual ritual with all fanfare due. Even though centuries passed since his death, the tradition is continued in memory of that great devotee, thereby illustrating the Lord's benign attitude to his bhaktas. Moreover the old bhakta installed an idol of Lord Parthasarathi in his new home at Kudamaloor and prayers are conducted to this also by special priests to perpetuate his memory.

THE SNAKE BOAT RACE

Incidentally, this Tiruvanchilavu Thoni taking materials to Aranmula became instrumental in conducting the snake-boat race held every year with great eclat attracting lacks of persons from far and near. It sprang up oddly-enough from the bloody rivalry existing between two warring chieftains of this region. Once it appears the chieftain of Ayiroor faction decided to take revenge upon his enemy,

the chieftain of Ranni by intercepting the boat carrying the traditional sacred materials for the annual festival, according to the wish of that venerable Nambudri whom God blessed after receiving athithya. When the news of thwarting by Ayroor chieftain reached the men of Ranni chieftain, they made elaborate plans and went with men enough in big snake boats to beat down the wicked enemy, if intercepted. Their overwhelming number and excellent preparedness chilled the spirits of the Ariyoor Chieftain and so he went home crest-fallen. Would Parthasarathi allow injustice score victory over the piety? No, in capitals greets the questioner. Later, the custom of snake boat race came to stay, not only on Tiruonam day, but on Utratiathi, the auspicious day of the consecration of the idol. This unique water festival luring every year lakhs of persons from several parts of state has added a glittering feather to the multi coloured cap of Keraladesa. Needless to say, it originated from this place.

THE VALLASADYA FEAST

This religious custom started thus with full faith in the Lord's grace, later developed into a state sport of unusual attraction and glamour. The boats called Chundan vallom are very big in size measuring more than 100 feet in length and an 18 feet long stern. It is manned by 100 rowers, 4 helmsmen and 25 singers. The boats participating in the Vallomkali normally assemble at the temple ghat by dawn and sail ahead in pairs under able supervision. The course lasts for two hours. It is quite thrilling to see the rowers striving their best, and the singers enthusing them with rousing tunes. As it is a race, each participant tries to outstep the other with utmost prowess. The spectators enjoy the spectacle with baited breath. Soon after the race, an elaborate sumptuous feast is given to the participants and it is called Vallasadya. It is quite rewarding and rejuvenating too. Ardent devotees deem it a pleasure to meet its expenditure, since the custom started with pious motive of offering prayers to Sri

Parthasarathy, the presiding of the deity whose omncompassion lifted and is lifting the deserving.

JANUARY FESTIVAL

The presiding deity is renowned as a bestower of children to the childless parents. A special feature that greets the visitors here is that the childless parents bathe and feed the local children stumptuously to wring the benedictions of Bhagawan for Santanprapti. When their wishes are granted, they come later with the children in the month of January to offer prayers to the Lord and participate in the festival celebrated to mark the joyous occasion. Another tradition that strikes the eyes is, the fish in the river, opposite the shrine are fed with maramaras, biscuits and coconut kernals by the women, if ever they find that their breast milk is quite inadequate to feed their children. When the fish are fed, their wish gets fulfilled - secretion of milk increases, sufficient for their infants. Faith does succeed, where grief groans under the dread weight of ignorance.

VARKALA

Varkala is the corrupt form of valkala - a word for garment in Sanskrit. A temple dedicated to Sri Janardhana swamy came up at a place, where Narada's valkala - uppercloth fell. Seems odd, isn't it? But true, cent percent. It lies at about 2 km west of Varkala Railway Station on the Trivandrum-Quilon line.

Once Brahma managed to steal a few seconds from his ardeous work and slipped into the lap of Morpheus - the Goddess of sleep, during office hours. It so chanced Narada - the Kalahabhojana entered then singing in praise of Mahavishnu in such an ecstatic joy that he not only became oblivious of the environs but made the listeners too share his state. Awakened by his melodious tune, the napping Brahma fell prostrate before him forgetting the decorum, decency etc. In the open assembly at it. The gods assembled there burst into laughter that alone brought Brahma to the world real. Feeling humiliated, he cursed them to go to Bhuloka to purify themselves by penance. They regretted. Narada advised the disconsolate to do penance at a place, where his valkala fell for reinstatement. They descended to the present Varkala, where his garment fell and did penance. During then Brahma came to this spot to conduct a yagna. Lord Janardhana, who visited to attend it, blessed the gods doing penance. In token of redemption, the gods built a temple and installed Janardhana's icon. The Lord brought holy Ganga here with his Sudarsan disc and now called Chakra Tirtha. The temple and its thirtha won fame on account of many miracles - curing of diseases and solving of problems of the true bhaktas.

The Sivagiri Hills, where Narayan Guru, a great social reformer built the Sarada Matt for meditation and carrying on pious activities and the holy spring papanasam, the famous health report are located very close to this and are additional attraction for tourists and devotees. So visit-worthy.

AMBAZHAPUZHA KRISHNA

UNIQUENESS

Ambazhapuza! How musical! vocalists thrilled by its sweet cadences filling their frames turn oblivious before letting out melodies through their god-gifted throats, while tongues, palates and lips succeed in giving forms to the tunes to immerse the audience in anandasagara. Its syllables drip music, while the name recreates the enchanting spectacle of the memorable scene of Krishna's Venunada that brought into existence here a splendid shrine for Krishna, who has been enjoying himself in playing on flute since the Dwaparayuga perhaps. Although the entire township has been overflowing with mellifluous notes of murali from the days of Muralipriya Krishna, it was not audible to any, lost in the mundane activities. But they feasted the ears of Pooratam Tirunal Thampuran once, when sailing in the company of Bilwamangla Swamiyar, who at once recognised that it was none other than Gopal's Venuganamrutha. Alighting from the boat, Bilwamangalaswamiyar directed his steps towards the source of the sound. It emanated from the peepal tree now found within the Prakara of the famous temple, built by the ardent Krishnabhakta Thampuran later. This holy spot embodies several uniques besides this peepal tree. It is for this temple the archamurthi was brought from the Thekkumkoor during the night for avoiding blood shed; it is to this temple the august Mulavirat of Guruvayur was brought for safety during the invasion of Tippu in 1790; it is this deity who has great preference for palpayasam more than the devotees; it is here the Lord used to feed with his own hands the Marars - the traditional instrumentalists in the role of server; it is here the much hallowed Pallipana and Vijyabali festivals conducted, and it is here the archamurthi is worshipped as Unnikrishna, though it resembles Parthasarathi with a whip in his right hand and Sankha in the left.

Embodying several such unique features, enjoying the privilege of ruling a kingdom; consecrated by the holy sage, adored by devout rulers, eulogised in devotional literature, this holy kshetra has been attracting devotees for five centuries now.

ANTIQUITY

The installation of Krishna's image in the temple has an awe-some background and the legends firmly establish the divinity pervading this kshetra since the Dwaparayuga. This sublime picturesque region endowed with the bounties of Nature, manifesting themselves in colourful spectacles of tranquil lagoons, encircled by exuberant growth of tall green trees amidst winding paths and criss-cross roads captivated the heart of Sri Balagopala, and made this land as his-second home. He used to play on flute to delight himself and the Nature since his starting of playing flute. Once it appears the Brahmin ruler of Cahmpakasseri Pooratam Tirunal happened to listen to the melodious strains coming from afar while sailing in a stately boat along with Bilwamangalaswamiyar. When acquainted with its unusual sweetness the Swamiyar at once realised that it was Bhagawan Krishna's flute that enraptured the region with its divine music. At once both of them set out to locate the source. And the sound was found emanating from the Aswartha tree now lying in the temple campus. Circumambulating the tree, the Swamiyar made prostration to it. Tampuran was informed of the presence of Balagopala in the tree, and being a haribhakta of supreme type, he availed the darsan of the Bhagawan with the atmic powers of the Swamiyar.

He then lost no time to building a grand shrine for Krishna, and made in enhancing granite image for installation. Auspicious time was fixed. Just before the commencement of consecration, the learned Nambudiri conducting the agamic rituals found-out a defect in the idol and said that it was not fit for installation due to wrong selection of the rock. It paralysed the Thampuran and disappointed the audience. Disillusionment held its grip on all the assembled.

When questioned to show the defect, the Nambudiri tapped at a certain part with an iron rod. And lo! there emerged a frog, and water gushed out from a cavity inside. Though he silenced the public, he did not still the troubled mind of Thampuran. Just then the Swamiyar advised him to get the Parthasarathi image, he saw once in Kurichi, a small village, lying in the country of Thekkunkoor Raja, who unfortunately was his sworn enemy. He was on the horns of dilemma. If it were to be taken by force, sure it would lead to war, and who knows how it ends. If stolen, it would be unbecoming on the part of a ruler to resort to such nefarious act. Consecration would desecrate the whole shrine and bring indelible shame to the Thampuran. Then they hit upon a plan. Accordingly, the minister went to the village and bought the image. Late in the dead of night, with the help of soldiers, it was transferred to the boat lay in wait. Before setting out they opened fire into the air and beat drums indicating their taking home of the idol by force, and opponents if any might come forward to stop. The soldiers of Thekkunkoor did not expect this strategy; and further they were unprepared for that eventuality. They did nothing; so God reached the spot safe, and the Thampuran who was on the tip of expectation received the image with all rituals due and it was taken to the newly-built temple ceremoniously. This exciting event took place on the Moolam day of Mithunam falling in June - July. A boat race on a grand scale is held every year to commemorate this great event at Champakulam. The image thus acquired, was installed at a propitious time on Thiruvanam day in Mithunam in 1613 A.D. The Thampuran's dream came true. And since then, it is receiving prayers by lakhs of people round the year.

Another spectacular event took place in this great kshetra. During the conversation with Bilwamangalaswamiyar, Thampuran earnestly entreated him to show him Bhagawan Krishna. When questioned what would he offer, if he could see Krishna in flesh and blood, the Thampuran unhesitatingly announced that he would offer his whole kingdom to God. Realising his sincerity and piety the Swamiyar said 'Yes'. On the next day special pujas were performed,

with the Swamiyar officiating as priest. Just at the conclusion, the Thampuran saw the divine hand extended to bless him. At once, he gave away his kingdom to the Lord and ruled the country as god's vice - regent, assuming the sublime name of Devanarayan. Besides, he proclaimed that his successors too would follow suit. In fact, they kept up the word. Unfortunately, after Thampuran's demise, when Marthanda Varma defeated the last ruler he surrendered himself to the victor after placing the keys of treasury and granary at the feet of Lord Parthasarathi. Noble was the proclamation! Nobler was the implementation!! And noblest was the tradition they left behind!!! Krishnalilas are strange. This deity thus became superior politically and spiritually too. And he protected the sanctity of Lord Guruvayurappan image during the invasion of Tippu Sultan in 1790 too. The priests of Guruvayur temple realising the infinite powers of the Lord brought Balakrishna's image for safe custody and concealed it in a room. It remained safe, and to mark this, the spot is called Guruvayupurambalam. Devotees pray to this place too.

THE PALPAYASAM EPISODE

This archamurthi developed special liking for palpayasam and visitors invariably offer this at the Ucchapuja - noon prayer time, and it is an important offering. Its speciality lies in a kind of sweetness that defies description. Its origin too is fantastic. Once it so happened the Thampuran to meet an emergency borrowed some paddy from a brahmin living in the nearby Thalavady village, but it was not returned as promised. The brahmin lacking in politeness demanded Thampuran to clear off the longstanding debt forthwith, when the Thampuran visited the temple for prayers. The Thampuran ordering the minister for immediate clearance, left the promises. The Minister managed to get paddy then and there and measured out the quality in the elephant shed of that temple and gave it to the brahmin, but laid one condition that the entire stock must be taken home by noon puja, else the state would confiscate it. Poor brahmin could not find labourers to transport the paddy before

the hour fixed. He was helpless and restless. He did then a great act. he denoted the entire quantity to God through a letter and left the campus on condition that it should be used for making Palpayasam and offer it to God at midday puja. The Minister's tact enabled the temple to get a huge quantity of paddy for daily naivedyam, besides creating a new tradition of offering Palpayasam to the deity daily. It was done and is being done with special ingredients, particularly best milk. The word goes round that once the entire quantity of milk available in that little town was utilised for making this special pudding for Naivedyam to the Lord, who tasting it to his satisfaction started blessing the adored munificently. So daily offerings have become very common in this temple.

THE TEMPLE AND ARCHAMURTHIS

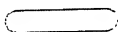
This sacred temple is built in spacious grounds has all the indispensable parts and paraphernalia like that of its counterparts, like prakara, gopurams, anakottal, kuttambalam, Srikoil, dwajasthambha etc. But its speciality lies in the archamurthi installed in the Srikoil. He is adored as Unnikrishna- Balakrishna and accordingly he should have been sitting at his butter pot, or playing flute under a tree. Here the image resembles Parthasarathi with whip in his right hand and crouch in the left. Krishna is Krishna whether he reveals with pot or flute. His sports are to be revered, and his giving hand to be adored.

FESTIVALS

All festivals held auspicious to Krishna are celebrated with pomp and splendour. The ten-day annual festival celebrated in Meenamasa falling in March-April has the greatest pull and the pageantry attending on it draws thousands. It has many specials and they are observed with due fanfare. The ninth day festival is a grand affair and processions and feasts feast the eyes and fill the bellies of visitors and artistes as well. It is on this day the Natakasala Sadya - a

grand feast in honour of the Marars, the traditional percussion artists is held. The artists are honoured fittingly, with trophies and titles, in addition to sumptuous feast. The story goes that Lord Krishna himself takes delight in serving the artistes with his own hands. Once when the venerable Bilwamangala Swamiyar visited the temple on this festival day, he found to his surprise the absence of the Lord in Srikoil. And shock greeted him when he found the Lord serving the artistes. The Swamiyar exhilarating at this oddity put the question "Why"? to the Lord. Pat came the reply "It is with their superb performance, the festival reaches perfection. Their contribution in accelerating the glory of this temple is beyond words. Therefore I am pleased to serve". None can measure the depth of the ocean of his Karuna, nor could any instrument record it at any time. How fortunate are the artistes and whatelse they require more than this. Among the other festivals this temple celebrates, mention must be made of Palipana. It is celebrated once in twelve years. Another strangest and most unique one is the festival of Vijayabali which is celebrated once in one hundred and forty four years. Ah grand! Imagination feels helpless in describing the grandeur attending on such oddest yet holiest festival. Lord Krishna played many sports and demonstrated infinite powers in several ways, and this is one perhaps reminding instant prostration. Offering it alone fetches bliss.

Do it anon! And gete attitude!!



SABARIMALAI

UNIQUENESS

Come November, begins then the Mandalapuja! There goes up then crescendo after crescendo of the resonant cadences of the holy name of Ayyappa, soaring higher and higher to reach, as it were, the snow-bound abode of the Lord of Kailas to invite Him to Sabarimalai for witnessing the colourful spectacles of the multi-splendoured glory of His youngest son, giving darsan to laes of devout bhaktas, reaching his Sannidhi, by trekking scores of miles with Irumudi on heads, japamalas in hands, and uttering 'Swamiye Saranam - Saranam Ayyappa, throughout the journey. Beginning from mid-November to mid-January, one can observe congregations of Ayyappa adorers, draped in black or yellow, adorning the foreheads and arms with stripes of ash marks across, going about in great hurry through lanes and by lanes to the make-shift Ayyappa shrines, sprouted in the street corners of slums, and spacious quadrangles of posh mansions, reverberating with devotional songs, in praise of the glorious life of that HariHaraputra, whose miraculous miracles, ushered in an era of democracy in the ritualistic form of worship - a novel and much-needed tradition though preached by almost all cults, ever since the religious awakening in man, alas! never implemented, much less honoured, anywhere in any religion, and at any time. In the East or West too. The mush-room growth of Ayyappa Sangas is a sure a sign of the spectacular change, the cult has inducted in the psyche of the asthika commonwealth that the high caste grey-haired orthodox turned Ayyappa pays homage to the outcaste, nomad turned Ayyappa, the very next moment of his becoming spiritual sadhaka, inaugurated with the wearing of japamala after due propitiation to the holiest Dharma Sastha. It is a common sight in temples early in

the mornings, the caste-conscious egoistical chandasa brahmin Ayyappa paying homage to the outcaste nomad turned Ayyappa by touching the feet of hitherto deemed worthless, colourless sweeper, branded as Harijan biped, as an act of reverence in recognition of divinity embedded in him soon after initiation. This classless casteless perfect equality inducted by this newly emerged, much popular, ever commendable and all-adorable Ayyappa cult is a unique feature in the annals of Hinduism. And it is a fast growing rare phenomenon of the post independent India.

The meteoric speed with which the democratic spirit of this cult has encircled mankind; the monumental change of casteless, classless, colourless oneness in the performance of worship it ushered in; the tremendous power of igniting bhakti instincts lying dormant in the illiterate ignorant it embodied, the unsurpassable solace it is raining on the deliberately degraded and consciously condemned outcaste children, sinking in the bog of misery has neither superiors nor parallels, if truth is accepted; but none likes that pungent pill. Despite dinning into the ears over yugas that perfect equality and unhindered freedom in matters of worship alone ensures harmony in society, it is neither practised nor encouraged. Hence decadence. Out right. But this all-adorable Ayyappa cult, built upon the very ruins of that sadly neglected factor has become instrumental in such phenomenal growth that none but itself can lay claim for equality. Hats off to the reformer.

The strength and secret of its unprecedented popularity lie in the core of ritual code it prescribed and injunctions it set for the prospective Ayyappa. They are, in fact, simple and sublime, pressing neither self-mortification, like fasting or doing penance for years, nor depletion of the hoarded money on yagnas or abhishekas etc. This is another principal factor for its rapid dissemination and ever swelling dimensions. Astounding it sounds that the number of Ayyappas visiting the sacred Hills has crossed millions in a very short period of, say three or four decades. "How" and "Why" takes us to the origin of this cult, and its method of initiation for constant

propitiation of that Dharma Sastha, revealing himself in meditation posture in his august abode, atop the Sabarimalai.

INITIATION

Any man, man only irrespective of age, caste, profession, language, religion, region etc. can adore him. Yes, adore him with a difference. It begins with wearing of Mala - a rosary for keeping count of the divine name after due propitiation, preferably in a temple under the aegis of Guru. The very moment he puts on the Mala around the neck, he becomes God Ayyappa in spirit, effect and merit. And Lo! he passes for divine Ayyappa till he reaches the Sannidhi, atop the Sabarimala by ascending the holy eighteen steps and offering prayers with the Pooja materials carried with him in the sacred Irumudi - an auspicious cloth bag with two compartments for keeping sacred objects of worship. The injunctions prescribed for the spiritual sadhaka are many, and rather rigorous. The Ayyappa according to the cult has to shed his ego-sense, manifested in anger, lust, greed and their vicious allies first and last. He must develop the sense of "Him who alone Is" which naturally arises out of the acceptance of his absolute unconditional surrender to that great Dharma Sastha. The several injunctions prescribed, like bathing twice a day followed by visiting temples at dawn and dusk; participating in choral singing of the hymnal songs; lying on floor, abstaining from taking of intoxicating stuffs, and indulging in chance games, and blood sports automatically induce him to turn Godward, and lead to self-purification and development of "One for all and all for one" concept, as evidenced in the inimitable comaradarie, mutual respect, and equality in offering prayer services. Would this equality and oneness end in mere jostling in temples, or going hand in hand in the streets? No. It continues, rather increases with incredible speed, as it were, throughout the period of sadhana, and more exactly to reaching Sabarimalai. And no where it is more explicit and striking than on the sacred banks of river Pampa, from where the ascent by foot starts. Here emerges to one's greatest surprise,

perfect equality and much needed correlation to such phenomenal proportion that the atmosphere seems trickling down love and regard in their pristine form; for, all the assembled appear oblivious of man-made distinctions and feel, move, talk and act so intimately that they have but one and the same hope, same dream, same aspiration, same goal, same divinity, and same, same same ... Seperatist tendency, or 'I' sense, or superior airs do not operate, or breathe not in that equalising air. Exchange of food, helping one-another in carrying one another's luggage, or lending help to the infirm, etc. etc. etc. meet the eye, and lighten the heart, from there and through out the ascent, why during the stay on the hill and till the parting point. This ONENESS arising out of the bed-rock of faith in the Divinity is peerless, and that Divinity too stands for such commendable collective unity and promotes it through the basic tenets. They instil the spirit of totality among the asthika humanity in its entirety at it. Now comes the origin of this exalted Divinity. The cause for his incarnation, and the popularity of his cult deserve deep study now!

ANTIQUITY

Here is another novelty! The history of origin of the Ayyappa cult reveals a strange blend of antiquity with historicity. There are two versions about the origin; one begins in the dim past, precisely at the time of churning of the Ksheerasagara - ocean of milk for obtaining Amrit to conferring immortality. The Devas, when totally debilitated by the atrocious acts of danavas, were shown the way by Sri Maha Vishnu - that the only sure way was to drinking of nectar which confers amarathva, though not invulnerability. When they started the Ksheerangara madana, making Manthara Parvatha as the churning stick, placing on the back of the tortoise form of Sri Maha Vishnu, and the snake Vsuki as the rope, first came Kalakootha poison, threatening to convert the worlds into heaps of ashes. The All-compassionate Lord Maheswar at once swallowed it

to save the universe from annihilation. Parvathi his loving spouse, throttled it before passing down the gullet. It made him Neelakanthi reminding the beholders the infinite concern the Lord has for the cosmos and humanity. Sooner many covetable objects, like the Kamadhenu, Kalpavrisa, Iravatha, Vuchehaisrava along with Sri Mahalakshmi turned up. There was much hullabaloo for them. Somehow the crafty devas out-witting the headless danavas owned them. But when the pot of Nectar surged forth, the disgruntled danavas came to grips with their partners and were ready for blood shed. Sri Mahavishnu then assumed a glamorously, bewitching, and mesmerisingly ravishing beauteous Mohini form to beguile the imbecile asuras and get the whole for the Suras only. When she volunteered to distribute the nectar, the witless danavas nodded their empty heads, drinking in the lovely juvenescent charms emanating from every inch of her tantalising body. The devas drank the nectar to their bellies, while the danavas were filling their eyes with her ethereal beauty and smacking lips all through. Lord Siva, after recovering from the Kalakootha effect was acquainted with Mahavishnu's engrossing Mohini's beauty. He decided to see it for himself. When solicited, Mahavishnu reappeared in the self - same form. It was an inexplicable beauty; uprose his lust and down flowed his powers of discretion. He grabbed and hugged her to such tightness that it gave forth a rare fruit - the birth of a baby son; and was christened; HariHaraputra - an appropriate name. Lord Siva left for His Kailas, leaving the babe under a green lovely tree with the lovelier multicoloured flowers looking upon that loveliest blossom-Harihara with their millions of eyes. The legend spinning round the heavenly characters and moving up and down thus ended, making room for the entry of childless king of Pandalam, a thriving Kingdom in the South Kerala pining for a heir. This King Rajasekhara was ordained to bring up that Dharma Sastha, born to perform another Daivakarya and reinstate Dharma in the world by killing Mahishi.

THE EPISODE OF BHASMASURA

The second version begins thus. There was once a formidable demon by name Bhasmasura. For obtaining rare boons, he propitiated Siva and did penance for centuries. When the compassionate Lord appeared to fulfill his desires, the perverted, power-mad demon asked for the boon of reducing to ashes any object - animate or inanimate when he puts his hand upon it. Though strange, Bhaktavasankar said "yes", alas! that alone caught him unawares. Anon Bhasmasura who wanted to test the efficacy of the boon granted, tried to place his hand on the Lord himself. Siva took to heels, running over hills and dales, plains and woods, but the arrogant demon did not leave him. He chased him from pillar to post. At long last, finding a thick bush, he concealed himself for a while, gasping, yet praying to Lord Mahavishnu to come to his rescue.

There descended then an enchanting sweet damsel - Mohini riding a dazzling colourful cloud straight in front of the demon searching for Lord Siva. A look at her took out his breath, as it were. His passion was up, and so he lost mental poise. He approached and stretched his strong, sturdy hands to clasp her; but who did he think she was! Cute Mahavishnu turned. Mohini then said with a giggle, "Well, I will be yours, after bath and Sandhyavandan". Deeming it as the Goddess LUCK itself embracing him, he hurried towards the river and made a plunge. In the act of cleaning his body from head to foot, he ran his palm over the head. Lo! ashes were seen flowing along with moving water making hissing sounds. Then emerged Lord Siva praising the rescuer, but he fumbled and stammered; for, Mohini's external glamour was so enticing that he craved for union. That union of the two brought forth a third i.e., Hariharaputra. This same legend is told with a different twist beginning with the descent of Mohini. It narrates that Mohini started dancing before the wits-lost, Bhasmasura, who was gazing and gaping at her. When the frenzy reached the zenith, he started imitating her dance poses. That is what was expected. Seeing him totally out of wits, she placed her

hands on head. He imitated, there went up then in smoke his whole form, passion etc. Though the second differed a little, it has the same beginning and ending. The Hariharaputra thus born was taken home by Rajasekhara the righteous king of Pandalam for adapting and making him the heir to throne.

Though his birth took place thus, it has another fascinating story behind and a divine purpose to be fulfilled by him. His birth was eagerly anticipated and ardently prayed for too. It is entwined with the lives of Dattatreya and his wife Leela, and through them the deliverance to Devendra and gods from the tyrannical rule of Mahishasura, who ruled Devaloka on deposing Devendra after a 100 year war.

The story is long and characters involved are many. It begins with Dhanu, a powerful asura, who had two sons by name Ramba and Karamba. Both the sons propitiated Lord Agni for grant of unlimited sway over the universes, and began dhirga tapas, Karamba standing in neck deep water, while Ramba in big blazing fire. Apprehending outster from the result of penance, Devendra taking the form of crocodile killed karambha. Depressed at the untimely death of brother, Ramba attempted suicide, but it was thwarted by Lord Agni himself, who appearing asked him to name his desire. Ramba asked for a son who would not be killed by Surasuras, or even manavas in any way. It was readily granted. As he was returning home triumphant, he saw a bewitching she-buffalo. Its form enchanted him. He at once turned into a he-buffalo and quenched his Kamadaha, but this was resented by a wild, native buffalo, the son of the soil. So it entered into fray and killed Ramba. But it had a strange ending. Seeing the he-buffalo slain, the chaste she-buffalo died in the funeral pyre. From the ashes was born Mahisasura, a formidable asura of great prowess. Knowing the cause of the death of his uncle Karamba, he prayed to Lord Brahma, and after centuries of penance obtained the boon from Vidhata that he would not be killed by any male. No sooner did he obtain it, he declared war against Devendra, and after a 100 year war, succeeded to his throne. He then unleashed a reign of terror. The afflicted

supplanted the Trinity for instant assistance. To relieving the devas from the onslaught of Mahishasura, the Trio created Durga, under the name of Chandika, out of their combined energies and accumulated powers, Chandika thus born took her seat, atop the highest summit of the Vindhyas. As if to herald her descent to end Mahishasura, she burst into such uproarious laughter that the whole mountain shook to its foundations. This indeed too much for egoistical danava to hear and much less to bypass. There began a fierce encounter between the two. Needless to prolong that the daivasakti scored a thumping, resounding victory over the danavadhama. Alas! the devas were neither freed, nor enjoyed even a momentary relief; for Mahishi, the cousin of Mahishasura took up the lost cause and started wreaking vengeance on the suras. The Mahishi advent needs elucidation now.

Mahishi was Leela, the darling wife of the much-adored Dattatreya in her purvajanma. She was the daughter of Sage Galava of great fame. After the wedding, the couple were leading a carefree life of comforts enjoying all the pleasures, but Dattatreya, fully conscious of his divine nature and the purpose of his birth, was preparing for Vanaprasthasram by withdrawing himself from the mundane life. Leela being earth and earthy desired to immerse in luxurious life only. Though he explained the futility of transitory life and momentary pleasures, she did not pay heed to the word of her husband. Although he expressed his displeasure at her frivolousness, she continued her way. Enraged Dattatreya, cursed her to be born as Mahishi - She-buffalo, but she retaliated at once with a counter curse - he to be born as Mahisha-a he-buffalo. According to the curse of Dattatreya, Leela was born as the daughter of Karamba and she was called Mahishi. When she came of right age, she learnt about cause of the death of her father Karamba at the hands of Devendra. She then developed hatred against suras, and to add to this, the death of her cousin Mahishasura gave further fillip to her pent up hatred. She did penance and obtained a boon from Brahma that she would not be killed by man or god, but would meet her death at the hands of one born to Haṁ and Hara and that too 12 years of servitude in an earthly kingdom.

Fortified thus with rare boons, she besieged Indraloka and disposed Devendra. She ruled for a pretty long time. For gods, it was a period of woe and every second became a living death. They went en masse to Lord Mahavishnu and prayed for deliverance. Mahavishnu then promised to rescue them permanently through Hariharaputra who would be brought up by the King of Pandalam for a period of 12 years. And as a temporary relief, Dattatreya was rejuvenated as a buffalo and was provided to Mahishi as mating companion to divert from her constant torture of the devas. In order to fulfil the promise, Lord Mahavishnu taking the form of Mohini descended to Bhuloka at the exact moment, when Lord Siva was in a predicament. Not only the union of Siva and Vishnu brought forth Hariharaputra, but it accomplished King Rajasekhara's ardent desire of SantanaPrapti. Before the disappearance of Lord Siva, the infant was informed of his mission-annihilation of Mahishi and the type of life he had to live in the Kingdom of Pandalam for a period of 12 years. A golden bell was hung round his neck to signify perhaps, his divinity and so he was called Manikantha or Manikandhara. Further, his advent fulfilled the promise of Ayyappa to Vijaya, a righteous brahmin living in the Pandian country in his past life, who expressed his wish of fathering Dharma Sastha himself when the latter appeared before the former for giving boons. So king Rajasekhara's cup of joy overflowed when he saw Manikanta crying in wilderness. He brought him home with utmost jubilation, but the scenario of his own palace reacted in a different way. His queen who was pining for a child, though received him with boundless affection, she turned a venomous serpent when she gave birth to a son, whom she wanted to make heir to the throne. Natural! Rajasekar's infatuation for the queen was so hopeless, that it made him blind against the ill-treatment meted out to Manikanta. Twelve years passed. The queen to get rid of Manikanta for ever feigned severe sickness and ordered for leopard's milk for ever cure. With the connivance of the scheming Diwan and hench men, he managed to send Manikanta to the forest on this work. The King having realised Manikanta's real form, agreed and awaited his sure arrival with the leopards milk. Manikantha brushing aside his father's proposal of sending hunters for help on the ground that the leopards would be

frightened at their sight went alone. And he was a renowned hunter and warrior by then.

His coming to the forest was eagerly awaited by sages and gods, who transformed themselves into wild animals and offered the desired milk. Devendra taking the form of tiger carried him to the palace. When he reached the Palace riding the tiger followed by packs of leopards, the queen's sickness took to heels. While Rajasekhara witnessed the divine drama, Just then, the holy sage Agasthya arrived and narrated the divine mission and said that he had to hurry to Devaloka for killing Mahishi, and the 12 years servitude was over too. Before leaving, he ordained that a temple with 18 steps to be built on the sacred Sabarimalai. It was carried out, besides prescribing a code of injunctions for the devotee pilgrim, as directed. They are implemented since then with utmost reverence.

No sooner did he arrive in devaloka confrontation began. Mahishi though put up a stout resistance with all her allies, met with death. When Manikanta threw her corpse on the bank of Alasa, Leela emerging prayed for a strange boon - she requested the slayer to take her as his wife. Chuckling to himself, he said that he would take her, provided there was no Kanni Ayyappan - first time visitor - worshipper in a particular year to shoot an arrow at the Saramkuttiyal - the name of a banyan tree which is shot at by every novitiate pilgrim. Mahishi jumped with joy and started waiting for the dawn of the year, when there would be no novitiate worshipper - Kanni Ayyappa to shoot at the tree. She has been waiting, waiting... Alas! her waiting would be endless and he certainly stretched to infinity, for there is witnessed a speedy, uninterrupted rapid increase of novitiates to the temple since then. Thus the stupid she - buffalo - Mahishi is out witted. Was not her object strange? Stranger was the condition set!! And strangest was Ayyappa's wit!!! Avarice must be modest, else...

Again when troubles shot up in the kingdom of Pandalam by the atrocious acts a ruthless bandit called Udayan, who bent upon

plunder and pillage rocked the whole country, Dharma Sastha reappeared and restored order by waging a fierce war against Udayam and his hordes. On fulfilling the humanitarian mission, he entered the garbha griha and disappeared - reunited with the Supreme. Hence the sanctity of the shrine that thrills every theist at its very mention.

As the entire divine drama was enacted in Kerala-the Parasurama kshetra, he became soon so popular and is worshipped as a living deity. Every temple of fame, whether Saivite or Vaishnavite, either ancient or modern reserves a niche of modest dimensions for his worship. And he is represented and worshipped in different stages of life in different places. He is worshipped at Kulathuppuha as Bala Ayyappa - first stage in life; Brahmachari Ayyappa at Aryankavu; Grihasta Ayyappa with his two spouses - Poorna and Pushkala at Achan Kovil; Vanaprastha Ayyappa at Sabarimalai and the realised yogi at Poonambalamedu the hill of the golden temple. In all the five abodes - except the Ponnambalamedu he is worshipped with a zeal that excites jealousy even among other deities, though they have transcended such base emotions. It is said that the Ponnambalamedu shrine is built by sages and it lies amidst the inaccessible thick forest. It is further believed that the dazzling bright celestial light appearing on Makara Sabkranti every year is emanating from this temple. Here he is receiving adoration from celestials and spiritual luminaries. Of course, of the five, Sabarimalai has the greatest pull and exceeded all temples in India with regard to visitation by lakhs of devotees, although twice a year only the temple is kept open for darsan.

THE PILGRIMAGE

The Sadhakas visiting the shrine after the rigorous austerities gain several merits. The 41 days Vrata naturally cleanses the systems; continence turns the mind upwards and loosens the grip of attachment to the Momentary thrills. When god-mindedness is unkindled, the Sadhaka's spiritual world gets illumined, resulting in the development of adorable virtues, like mutual regard, love, dedication etc. So he becomes physically, mentally and spiritually

pure. Its symbolic significance too has much to elevate and enliven the Sadhaka. The pilgrimage is a kind to soul's journey to meet the Highest for Sayujya mukti-merging of the jivatma with the Paramatma. Carrying on Irumudi holding eatables in one compartment and the ghee filled coconut in the other has yet a connotation of supreme significance. While on the journey, the Sadhaka subsists on and empties the enables contained in the rear compartment, which amounts to exhausting of prarabdha Karma before merging, and the abhisekam of ghee containing in the coconut signifies merging of the soul with the supreme. Finally the body joins the Panchabhutas, when the coconut is thrown into fire. Thus it embodies the highest wisdom and greatest truth that mankind has to learn and profit by. More than the promise of the other worldly bliss, the highly commendable religiosity, equality, fraternity, humility, sublimity etc. it showers on the Sadhukas is making it as only religion worthy of aspiration, implementation and emulation. The magic of its popularity lies in its democratic spirit, and the logic of its unprecedented phenomenal growth owes to the multifarious varieties of manifold blessing that the Dharma Sashta is raining on the adorers of course in strict accordance with the merits of the intentions listed down in the petitions submitted for his merciful dispensation. And he is holding the scales even. Hence attraction to the hope-lost poorest, dangling from the lowest rung of the social ladder.

THE TEMPLE

It is situated on a huge high mound of gigantic proportions, spacious enough to hold thousands of bhaktas. The beauty of the presiding deity is beyond description. Though there are some mini-shrines, all the eyes and souls of the visitors revolve round that enchanting Dharmasastha. If once the Sadhaka visits and feasts his eyes with the beautiful Dharmasastha's icon in yogic posture, it leaves such indelible impression that he continues to visit it year after year, nay life after life, if he has, as the feeling of ecstasy is unparalleled, and the relief it rains is unprecedented, and hope it instils is unrivalled.



LORD SIVA OF ETTAMANUR

UNIQUENESS

Erring is common for humans. An axiomatic truth. No comments. But forgiving, however divine it is, must be made to operate within a fixed orbit, only for the well-being of the beneficiary; else it does more harm to the grahita - receiver than the data - giver; for, the human nature is a nature that can remain under control with a sceptre than by word of mouth or knit of brows. If once the errer comes to know that the forgiver glosses over the faults, he becomes a flagrant defaulter, serviceable to none- animate or inanimate, inclusive of himself. Artful sternness in dealing with the arrogant is a necessity. And is rewarding too. Krishnaiti makes one successful, and is highly desirable in a world, where justice is derecognised, or held upto ridicule-sympathy, of course, has its place, but misplaced sympathy brings woe. Sympathy tainted with over credulousness, produces Bhasmasuras, who hesitate not cutting the very duck that lays golden eggs. This world is not for Sivas or Buddhas. Krishnas alone thrive and stand as men of mark.

Ferocity succeeds where sympathy fails. Isn't benevolent dictatorship upheld and advocated to rulers? This perhaps, is the chief cause of Ettamanur Siva's ferocity. Here, he is the veritable Rudra, forgiving nothing, but giving everything to the deserving innocent or penitent. Wanton indifference and deliberate hood-winking can never be tolerated, nor allowed deferred. Indefinitely. As is the fault, so is the retribution. Graver the commission, harsher is the retribution, but it is proportionate. And lo! it carries penalty when dodged. No mercy nor remission. Fair justice moves on the fours sans rancour or vengeance. If perversity, or duplicity raises its head, he turns a doctor and uses scissors and needle. Soon after making the sutures, he collects the fee, with

interest for wilful evasion; he becomes now a prototype of Tirupathi Vaddikasula Venkataramana, the prince among usurers, who exacts payments due with interest, upto date sans considerations of any kind.

This is the philosophy of Ettamanur Siva, adored here in his fierce aspect. And he revels in it, for he knew for extending boundless Vastyalyanugraha once to an unscrupulous asura, he ran over vales and dales to save his person and came out unscathed only on implementation of Krishnaniti by Lord Mahavishnu who released him from that conceited Bhasmasura. Roudra has its due place and a commendable merit.

Does it mean that the sway of absolute roudra must be eternal. No, Karunya never to be totally stamped out nor defaced. It has its niche and more adorers, to speak the truth. Moreover, evolved souls and brilliant brains hailed and eulogised it. That is the aspect in which Lord Siva is revealing himself at Vaikom, just a few Km off this Ettamanur. If one stands for mercy, the other for fierceness. Both are necessary, rather indispensable. Doesn't the metal coin of any denomination have two sides - obverse and reverse? Both make it valid - legal tender. The Lord of Vaikom is Karunaswarupa - grants all and expects nothing in return, but desires seeing his bhakta well off. He forgets what he has given and what is more, he is accessible with or without, pala, patra, pushpa or thoya. But the Lord of Ettamanur is Rudraswarupa, though showers all the needed unhesitatingly, he watches carefully whether the given boon is put to right use or not, and if ever the boon is misused or abused, he uses his Trisula to do what is needed. Now make a list of what else the Lord is treasuring up in his Koil for enabling the adorers live a life of Trikaranasuddi - pure in mind, speech and action. It is this temple that contains a mysterious lamp, obtained and lighted up by none other than the Moolavirat amidst thunder and lightening about three and half a century back, which is still burning round the clock with five wicks and oil overflowing; it is this temple's metal bull that gave grains used as a remedy for curing

stomach oilments; it is this temple's mural paintings and wooden carvings that illustrate Sivalilas to igniting the slumbering theistic instincts and are hailed as specimen of superior craftsmanship; it is this temple that celebrates an annual festival called 'asthanamandapa' late in midnight, attended by bhaktas in several thousands and it is when the much venerated Ezhara Poonanai - seven and half an elephant darsan is made available; it is the glory of this kshetra, described elaborately in legends, like Vamana and Padmapuranas, and was very popular in the Tretayuga as Manimanor; it is in this place, where Lord Siva unable to keep pace with Khara in deer's form carried it in his hands, hence the name of Ettamanur, it is here Khara performed Kanakabhisheka to Lord Siva' it is here he installed Balagopala image to appease and lessen the fierceness of Lord Siva, and it is this place that was cursed by Sage Lomaharsha to be without worship for about 1000 years, and was given a fresh lease of life by Bilvamangala Swamiyar, who entrusted it to Ashtamanagalathu Muthatu after building a grand temple.

Renowned thus both in legend and history, enshrining awe-inspiring marvels, trodden by Lord Siva himself, adored by sages and demons, like Vedavyasa and Khara, praised for the works of arts and architecture, endowed munificently by princes of fame, this shrine of Lord Siva has been luring thousands of devotees since the Treta yuga.

SOURCES

This ancient seat of Lord Siva has adorned several pages of legends and literary works like Vamanapurana, Padmapurana and Sthalamahatmyams, besides history with dates and facts, since the 16th century exactly with the renovation in 1545, and also obtaining of the lamp tapping the list of the uniques, the temple is embodying now.

The awe-inspiring history of the temple dates back to the Tretayuga; and its glory originates from the inexhaustible devotional springs of Khara - demon though served that indomitable wicked Ravanabrahma, he was a Sivabhakta of an exceptional type. Being a domineering general with unprecedented commandership he was rewarded with a large territory in Dandakaranya. And was related to Ravana through his father. His ardent devotion reached the point of consummation with obtaining several boons from Lord Siva, propitiated at Chidambaram at the instance of his Preceptor Malyavan. Among the boons blessed with, three Siva lingas take precedence over others - they were big in size and grand in appearance. For taking them home, he adopted an odd method-carried one in each hand, and the third in the mouth. When felt tired on the way he alighted at the spot, where the Vaikathappan Kovil stands now. After a while, he lifted it but failed. He found Vyagrapada Maharishi passing that way while repenting over the predicament. Realising his spiritual wealth, on he entrusted to him the holy work of installing the sacred Sivalinga. Comprehending the divinity of the soil and environs, he decided to instal one Sivalinga at Ettamanur and the other at Kaduthuruthi. As planned, he did, and made the three places great Siva khsetras of eternal spiritual significance. Later, he did penance again for further boons - primary passion being that Lord Siva should be with him for ever, or vice versa. Would that Omnicompassionate Bhaktavashankar ever deny such devotion-soaked desire? He finds pleasure in fulfilling any desire. Appearing before him, he said Thadastu - be it so. He started enjoying playing with Khara, as and when he desired and craved for company. Both regaled each other in several kinds of sports, totally oblivious of the surroundings. It pleased him most and the Lord best. One day assuming the form of a deer, Khara invited the Lord to participate in 'the chase and catch' game - one running at high speed, the other following to catch. Being an adept at running, he began leaping and scurrying with incredible speed over vales and

dales across the whole region covering hundreds of miles. Asura with numerous strange potentialities, he felt neither physically, nor satisfied mentally. But the Lord was not keeping pace with him. Nor was he as game-some as Kshatriya. He tired and decided to stop for a while. Then by sheer leaping deer came within his reach. He caught it, at excitement, and carried the deer for a short distance. It is here, and the sport thus ending gave the spot an appropriate name. It is - Ettia (carried) Man (deer) Ooru (place) - place where deer was carried according to the Malayalam language. In time it became Ettumanur, a corrupt form, made for easy pronunciation and ready use. What a game! How glorious an outcome!!

THE EPISODE OF PINGALA

Yet there is another fantastic episode linking Khara with this holy spot. This Khara was a great preceptor imparting knowledge to aspiring disciples in his own ashram. One by name Pingala completing his course requested his guru humbly, as he must give him as Gurudakshana. Khara evaded the reply, knowing his penniless poverty of his student. When pestered to name a sum, he said ten thousand crores of gold coins. Pingala at once refused. Seeing him tear-stained, Khara suggested that both he and Pingala would get that huge amount from the Almighty by performing severe penance. They began. When Mahavishnu appeared before them, he expressed their joint aspiration. He granted then and there ten thousand crore gold coins. Just at this happy juncture, Lord Siva appeared. In his uncontrollable exuberant devotion, he performed Kanakabhishekha to Lord Siva - his istadaivam. At his unparalleled peity, the Lord gave him another ten thousand crore gold coins. Pleased with this unexpected harvest, both performed Kanakabhisekham to Mahavishnu. After this Pingala left Gurukulam with the blessings of Khara and resumed his meditation later propitiating Lord Mahavishnu.

Siva. Overjoyed with his intense devotion, the Lord granted him a Sivalinga, the very same holy one is now worshipped in this temple. Khara in grateful memory installed Mahavishnu's image on the north west corner of the temple. And is called Balagopala statue, who with his pranks and play would certainly abate the extreme ferocity of Lord Siva. Whatever might be the cause, Keezhtiri Kovil is luring devotees for an eyeful darsan of Balagopala, whose childhood life and plays send thrills in the spines of the beholders at his mention and sight.

THE TEMPLE

The holy shrine bears striking resemblance to the Vaikatappan temple at Vaikom in its vastness and constructional designs, but differs in one aspect - it is built at a lower level, say about four or five feet below the road level. The plinth area rises above a hollow ground far below the surroundings. The Srikoil is also circular in shape and adorned with a conical roof covered with copper plates and shining Kalasam atop.

THE EPISODE OF VALI VILAKKU

As you enter through the main gate, you come to Balikapura, where you see an unusual big size Valivilakku - a celebrated lamp burning bright with five wicks. Normally every devotee offers prayers first to this, as it is associated with divine connections. And it came into this place under circumstances that impel instant genuflections. It is, as word goes round was installed in 1545 AD and is burning since then without a minute's break. Of the many kinds of offerings to the temple, pouring oil with rituals is one, and it's given top importance. It is so big that it contains nearly 3 litres of oil. As every visitor invariably worships it with oil offering, it is seen always overflowing! The excess is collected in vessels. Miraculously the quantity that is preserved is quite adequate for burning all the lamps

on festive occasions, requiring scores and scores of tins, in addition to daily use. How grand! It springs another surprise. The soot collected on the cover of the lamp cures eye diseases. Hence the craze for collection. It is believed that worshipping this lamp with vows releases the victims of the evil spirits from their grip. That is the power of the holy lamp and it has awe- some background. This happened 1545 AD.

One evening a few temple officials were standing in front of the west tower, whiling away their time in idle gossip. Just then a bell smith approaching them requested in all earnestness to buy the huge brass lamp, he was in possession of, saying to give any amount for his night's meal. It was a superb piece of workmanship and shone brightly. Some irresponsible people, besides giving evasive replies answered that there would be none to supply oil to such big lamp. Thereupon the seller replied that it being an auspicious one, it might burn without oil or with water; and if kept in the temple, devotees might pour oil and see it burning eternally. Alas! he was heckled at. At this moment all on a sudden a mysterious person rushing from inside took the lamp and disappeared. It was followed by lightning and thunder to the utter stupefaction of all, since there were neither black clouds, nor strong winds that precede such ear-splitting thunder and blinding lightning. All happened in a split second, and when calm returned after this unexpected and mysterious phenomenon, to the astonishment of all, the lamp was seen hung up and burning bright with its five wicks and oil to its brim. Where was the seller? Who poured the oil and by whom was it lighted? None could answer. The loquacious men bent their heads and regretted bitterly over their useless talk. From that moment this celebrated lamp is burning without a single minute's stop, nor the oil is poured by the temple officials. Attributing this strange occurrence to the God's mysterious hand, devotees started pouring oil, and it is burning over a three and half a century period. Inscrutable are the ways of God, and infinite are the men who tried and are trying to lift the veil, but success is proving a mirage.

THE EPISODE OF NANDI

On crossing, after prayers to this divine lamp, the visitor goes to the garbhagriha. Just opposite the Srikoil, there are two images of Nandi, the Lord's mount installed on a raised platform in the Mukhamandapa; one is a stone made and the other metal. This metal Nandi was offered by the King of Chambakksseri under special circumstances. According to the belief in circulation, the King who suffered from stomach pain came to the Lord for cure, when he met with disappointment at all places. Believing in the Lord's abundant compassion and that alone cures him, he mediated and worshipped the Lord for 41 days, observing austerities enjoined. Miracle happened. The ailment that could not be cured by the expert doctors with best medicines disappeared sans doses and sutures. So he decided to offer a grand feast as it is done at Vaikom, spending some thousands on it, when Lord, as belief goes Siva also would present and partake. But the Lord of Ettamanuar advised him not to import or introduce traditions of other shrines and he could give his mite in cash. The King implicitly implemented the Lord's injunction - offered a huge sum and endowed the Lord with jewels. Along with them, he offered this big size Nandi filling it with grain on offering due rituals. Bhaktas used to take a few grains of the paddy from a small hole to cure stomach trouble. This metal Nandi worked more than a living doctor, and so has been receiving prayers by the visiting bhaktas since then. Beyond this Mukhamandapam, lie the grand corridors that delight the hearts of the visitors with interior craftsmanship and exterior rows of lamps fixed on the wooden frames, adorned with trellis work. The tall golden staff lies outside the balikalpura, and the anakottil next to the tower.

From the available inscriptions it is deduced that this temple was built in 1542. The workmanship of the sculptor is seen in many objects used for interior decoration, like panels depicting many episodes from Ramayana and Bhagavata. Art critics paid rich tributes to the artistry of the sculptors for the presentation of

traditional stories on walls in colour. The pictures of Nataraja in dancing postures are quite enhancing exuding grace, bliss, glory and harmony. They drive home eternal truths that good gets rewards and wickedness carries punishments due.

THE ARCHAMURTHI

In the circular shaped Srikoil, a two-foot high Sivalinga is installed on a high pedestal. The deity adorned with garlands and dazzling jewels lifts the souls at its first sight itself. Its radiating grandeur, lit by the flickering of brass lamps around makes the devotees rivet their eyes on him for long, forgetting the world around. Highly evolved souls lost in ecstatic raptures praised this Lord in prose and verse. Several holy treatises are written, bringing out the glory of the Lord and the shrine. Another practice observed here is the worship of Mother Parvathi, supposed to be at the back of the Lord's image. To the south of Srikoil there are separate shrines for Ganapathi and Dhakshinamurthi, and to the north for Dharmasastha. The Srikoil has two entrances facing east and west and there are Dwarapalakas at each entrance.

FESTIVALS

ASTHANAMANDAPA DARSAN

The major annual festival falls in the month of Kumbham corresponding to February - March. It is a ten day festival. On the eight day, the festival reaches the pinnacle of festivity, when the Lord is worshipped in a specially decorated Mandapa lying to the north east corner. This begins strangely enough at mid night, yet thousands and thousands of bhaktas coming from far off places participate lustily and offer their mighty mite in cash. The darsan of the Lord is quite auspicious and it goes by the name of 'asthana mandapa darsana'. It is the most glorious occasion to avail, when the

Lord's sports receive due recognition and propagation. Devotees who congregate on this special occasion redeem their vows and offer special prayer services to the Lord to enabling them cross the ocean of Samsara. Like the Ashtami festival at Vaikom, this is celebrated with due eclat and great piety. The large copper vessel kept in the Mandap overflows with Kanikas offered by the devotees. It is the most propitious time to take vows or redeem. Hence unmanageable crowds.

It is on this occasion alone the Ezhra Ponnalai - the seven and a half gold elephant darsan is made available. The golden elephants numbering seven and a half weighing exactly 210 lbs each were donated to the Anzham Thirunal Marthanda Varma, ruler of Travancore as an act of atonement for destroying the temple property during his military campaign. Each of the seven is two feet high and the last is one foot only. Hence the name Ezhara Ponnalai, and they are acting as the guardians at the eight points. The oddity of making seven and a half became expedient on account of the tradition followed in the temple. If eight full elephants were to be made, they would go to Ettomnesseri Illom - the groups of priests. So only seven and a half an elephant was made to endow them to the temple. The temple when compared with many others is very rich in owning many costly jewels, worth some crores.

LOMAHARSHA MAHARSHI EPISODE

According to legend once Lomasha-Vyasamaharshi's disciple visited this temple. During bathing in the temple tank, he slipped and fell down. The on-lookers enjoyed a hearty laugh; though it was unintentional. The sage grew wild and cursed that the temple would turn desolate and the town depopled for one thousand years. Alas! the curse ran its course - for a period of thousand years, the entire region was nothing but a thick forest infested with wild animals.

Later, once when the Sage Bilwamangala Swamy visited this area, he found to his shock desolation reigning supreme. He found the reason for wilderness and discovered the Sivalinga after intensive search. He offered then puja with redoubled ardour and ecstatic joy with plantains and molasses he had brought for his own food. He resurrected the image of Vishnu and breathed fresh life into the temple. He regularised the temple functions and routine pujas. Besides, he appointed the priests and entrusted the temple administration to the Asthamangalathu Moothathu. His services opened a new chapter in the history of temple, and once again the Lord started blessing the adorers as in the past. After some centuries, the Ettomnesseri - eight Illoms took over administration and conducted temple activities to the satisfaction of asthika community. In 1542 AD the temple received renovation and it was chiefly done by a Pandyan king by name Chandra Bhaskara, who according to belief attended to rebuilding on a grand scale many of the parts, either dilapidated, or nearing that state, soon after the miraculous cure of his affliction - release from evil spirits. It is during that period, the temple acquired that celebrated lamp, burning bright now.

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ANNADANA PRABHU OF VAIKOM

UNIQUENESS

"Vaikom! Vaikom! Vaikom! Vaikom for Harijans!! Parameswar darsan for Panchamas!!!! The citadel of Brahmanism shattered!!!!!!" Slogans of similar brand reverberating the audience halls and office chambers of every town and city rent the air in 1925 AD. It was the day for a great change. Radicals and atheists, rationalists, ^{and} iconoclasts jumping into fray made such hullabaloo with fanatic frenzy that threatened the very existence of the orthodox Brahmins - the custodians of the ancient culture of that holy temple. As the movement gathered momentum with the tacit approval of Jatipita, centuries old traditions and age-long customs received such a jolt that they found their mornings cut asunder and left in mid-sea for water burial. The zealots of the new-fangled radicals with lethal weapons in their hands and rising voice to the highest pitch entered into the precincts of the Vaikathappan koil at Vaikom to take hundreds of panchamas into the innermost part of the sanctum to lift the black, thick impenetrable, curtain deliverately hung before the eyes of Lord Parameswar by the Brahmins with the detestably selfish, shamefully sectarian objectives of establishing superiority over their luckless, benighted brothern, who by accident were born with misfortunes of infinite variety that segregated them from their own fellowmen.

As planned and prepared the panchamas enjoyed the sight of Bhagawan Parameswar for the first time in life and realised what inexhaustible spiritual treasure they had missed till then. And filled their bellies with sumptuous feast, the world renowned Annadana Prabhu had been serving to the high caste people over centuries. And lo! they returned home garlanded in token of their

achievement. The protagonists of the progressive reformers, who piloted the movement were richly honoured in the media with head lines in the front page of almost all the periodicals to the outright mortification of caste conscious, egoistical, perverse orthodox high-born brahmins who languished in their hide-outs recounting their lot through streaming eyes, heaving hearts and upthrown hands to the Ominicompassionate Lord, who smiled away even without opening his eyes signifying, as it were, his approval of their plight as the fittest retribution for misinterpreting the divine injunctions. What prevented the Vaikom lord to remain mute at that revolutionary change? Why was the crashing down of temple doors received with such infinite delight by all classes, except Brahmins? What secret lay behind their autocracy? From whom did they inherit such absolute power? When and how? Answers to these and similars unfold the mystery of the Brahmin domination and envisage the bright chapter opened for the castaway children of our Pujya Bharatamata.

For a full account of the state of affairs that culminated in the complete, clean victory for the radicals and out right positive destruction to the reactionaries, study of the antiquity of the temple is quite expedient at this stage. Besides, it sheds enough light on many more plus points that thrilled the theists at its very mention; it is here the illustrious demon Sivabhakta Khara, an eminent lieutenant of Lankadheeswara Ravana set the Sivalinga, while carrying it home; it is here Vyagrapada Maharshi worshipped that Sivalinga for yeras and was blessed with the darsan of Uma and Maheswar, hence the naming of the Kshetra after him - Vyagrapuri, or Vaikom for short; it is here Bhargavarama installed that resplendent Sivalinga left by Khara; it is to this Lord, he brought Brahmins from afar and established several rites for the conduct of nithya naimithika pujas; it is here on the Manyasthanam - a particular spot, adjacent to the north of garbagriha, Lord Siva was seen by Bilwamangala Swamiyar, taking meal served by no other than his loving consort Parvathi; it is its Utuppura - dining hall that served food for thousands of brahmins everyday for centuries; it is

this temple's inimitable architectural marvels that won the highest appreciation of great critics of art, like Bernier etc; it is here Vyagrapada emancipated an Yakshi harassing the locals during her nocturnal rounds; it is here Lord Parameswar acted as a drummer to help a helpless woman supplicant during the Utsavabali, an annual festival; it is to this Mulavirat, the Udayanapuram temple diety Subrahmanya comes in procession to pay obeisance every year; it is this Lord, who developed a particular preference for Sahasrakalasa puja, the costliest of sevas spreading over 10 days; it is here the redoubtable Manikyavachakar was taught a lesson by Lord Siva in changing his horses into dogs for using temple campus for his personal gain; it is here the Lord reveals himself in three aspects Dakshinamurthi - bestower of wisdom, Kirita, the famous hunter and Satchidananda Lord of bliss and what is more, it is here orthodoxy with its bigotry took deep roots that ultimately turned out to be the standing example of Brahmin domination, or a byword for orthodoxy.

Renowned for such peerless distinctive features, fortified by divine associations, visited by poet-saints and saint-seers; worshipped by the incarnated Mahapurushas, patronised by eminent rulers and glorified for feeding brahmins on large scale for years this mokshapuri praised as Dhakshnakasi entered the archives and occupied a significant place as the strong hold of orthodoxy, simple and perfect.

ANTIQUITY

Its past embodying a divine glow and spiritual eminence begins in the Tretayuga. Khara is the protagonist in the great drama played here. He was a danava, holding a formidable post in the kingdom of Lanka, ruled by wicked Ravanabrahma, who lent ineffable charm to the great epic Ramayana. But Khara was different from his earthly boss. Being an ardent Sivabhakta of extra-ordinary theistic leanings, he travelled all the way to Chidambaram to propitiating Nataraja - the All compassionate

Cosmic Dancer. When his austerities and deep penance pleased the Lord most, he granted the boons asked for, besides blessing him with three rare resplendent Sivalingas. When transporting posed a problem to him, he adopted a novel, yet pious method - carried two lingas, one each hand, and the third one in mouth! An ardeous task indeed. As he held them thus in his aerial flight for long, he grew tired and desired rest for a while. Descending straight at the place, where the temple stands now, he set the linga held in his right hand in knee deep water for relief. After recouping, he tried to lift the Sivalinga, but could not. All his physical prowess and asurasakti deserted him. He felt completely down and regreted much for breaking his flight. To his good fortune then, he spied Vyagrapada maharshi passing that way. Deeming him the right person to be trusted, he solicited his assistance-entrusted the Linga for worship, and proceeded to Ettumanur about 25 km away for installing the Linga held in left hand. And the last one held in the mouth was consecrated at Kuduthurthy, lying between the two places. These three sacred spots sanctified by Lord Siva's boon became premier Saiva Kshetras, when befitting shrines built by the asthika community in due course. Being situated in a radius of 25 km area, they can be visited in a single day, and it is believed that for getting full merit, one has to avail the darsan of all the Lords on one and same day. It is quite auspicious and hence the visitors hurry from place to place for prayers to gaining spiritual solace.

EMERGENCE OF VYAGRAPADAPURAM

Now comes the part played by Vyagrapada Maharshi. The handing of Sivalinga by Khara was indeed a befitting reward to his exemplary devotion - soaked earthly existence. Considering Khara's solicitation as a bolt from the blue, he worshipped the Lord with redoubled ardour day in and day out, and set models to dedicated life. So he was held in high esteem both by Munikulam and Janakoti. Belief gained currency that it was MOTHER Parvathi, when thoroughly satisfied with his ennobling spiritual life, gave Him

darsan first under a peepal tree. He availed that divine spectacle on the auspicious Ashtami in the dark fortnight of the Vrischika masa falling in Nov-Dec, and as such it is given special sanctity and the spot too is elevated to the pinnacle. The craze for the darsan of it is great, bhaktas reach the temple precincts quite early and await that auspicious early hour with utmost devotion. Due to habitation of Vyagrapada muni for a pretty long time and his bhakti being adarsa, people called the place after him - Vyagrapadapuram, or Vyagrapuri. In short it became very popular as Vaikom.

The story goes that Parasuram is the chief architect of temple's enviable history and the spread of its immaculate glory. According to belief, he once saw by accident from above in his flight to North, a bright linga in knee deep water. Coming down straight at the spot, he embraced it thrilled by its unearthly splendour. Envisioning the cause of its emergence and its bright future, he started building a grand temple around a square dais, he made then anon to install the linga according to Sankarshana rites. Soon after completion, he employed devout priests for the conduct of pujas and to promote devotional cult through several pujas and Utsavas. He enjoined then that whosoever worships the Lord during the Ashtami Festival with a bilwa leaf or any denomination of coin, or lighting up of lamp certainly gets liberation and enjoys heavenly bliss during his sojourn in the world. He built up various traditions for the conduct of every activity in the temple including Annadana. The scrupulous attention he paid to administrative affairs being flawless, generation of priests implemented all that he ordained to the very letter of every tenet. But later sectarianism and dogmatism entered the body politic of the temple management and gnawed at the vitals of noble traditions. And when bigotry assumed its unethical heinous shape, reformers entered the arena and succeeded in cutting it to correct size. The unprecedented clamour for admission of Harijans into this temple stands a sure index of the degeneration entrenched in the temple management, and it signifies rightly the public apathy for the orthodox Brahmins that aimed at glorification and perpetuation of the ill-gotten power. Alas! it ended in its nullification. Total and

permanent. Does God close his eyes for ever? The stone God may, but the living God being ever awake, administers justice at the right time, when wrongs get righted. This natural phenomenon occurred here when Harijan entry into the temple in the agitation started during 1924-25 AD.

HISTORICITY

The temple when built during parasurama's time was under the Management of 108 Nambudri Illoms. The priests called Tantris looked after to both spiritual and secular growth and carried on the activity of the day to day administration with devotion due. The Tantriship changed hands from Menattu tantries to Mekattu Tantris after the fire accident in this temple. The Menattu tantries' dedication is boundless, and but for their devotion the linga would not have been here in this shape as it is today. The temple received royal patronage from the rulers of Travancore and Cochin regularly. Though the murals, wooden panels and certain decorative pieces changed patterns several times due to renovations from time to time, its glory did not diminish. As in the case of all temples, it is now under the Devaswom Management controlled by the State Government of Kerala.

SOURCES

Among the corpus of temple literary works, the Vyagrapura Mahatmya is quite exhaustive and gives elaborate accounts of the temple growth right from the date of Khara's entrusting the Sivalinga to Vyagrapada. Historical evidence starts from the 11th century and is embodied in several inscriptions and architectural styles. The carvings on walls and ceilings, despite narrating prominent puranic episodes, they help in fixing the periods of construction. The Vaikom Temple Entry Movement that brought out a great revolution also throws sufficient light on the dates and facts of the temple - construction, destruction and renovation.

THE TEMPLE

This sacred shrine facing east occupies an extensive area of eight acres. It is surrounded by a massive parakara with four gates and modest towers over them. Though they are neither tall, nor impressive with sculptural adornments, they heighten the sanctity. The Srikoil is circular in shape and is quite majestic and awe-inspiring. It has a cone shaped roof covered with copper plates, and is adorned by a dazzling gold Kalasa. Its inner walls decorated with wooden panels and mural paintings offer rich fare to the connoisseurs of art by their superb artistry; and memorable episodes from puranas to the asthikas. It is as praised, a specimen of the indigenous style of architecture of the 16th century. The circular structure, a Kerala special, casts an enchantment to the outsiders and turns out a topic of discussion of eternal interest.

THE TEMPLE COMPLEX

Entering through the eastern Mahadwara, one sees the Anakottai - elephant shed first. Its fore is so spacious that it accomodates several elephants to stand in rows during Utsavas and annual festivals. The 317 foot-tall gold-plated flag staff gleams next into sight and elevates his soul. The temple tank lies adjacent to the Uttupura - the feeding shed. There are some peepal trees in the vast courtyard. A mini-temple enshrining the Goddesses Vanadurga lies to the southern tower of the temple, and is called Pananchikkal. She is venerated with great fervour; for, she has had a grand strange story. It is said that during the days of Vyagrapada Maharshi, there came some calamity to the people by a certain Yakshi - a Kshudra devatha, who during her nocturnal rounds terrified humans and beasts alike with her dreadful form. The afflicted sought the help of Maharshi Vyagrapada, who in turn supplicated lord Ganesh for benign intervention to warding off the disaster. Moved by the pathetic appeal of the sage, Lord Ganesh looked at Trisuli, his powerful assistant. Comprehending its implied meaning, Trisuli

forthwith cut the Yakshi into three pieces and threw them in different directions. There arose then Goddesses from the very spots where her mutilated body fell. All the three became pious kshetras later; for this Yakshi was an enchanting Gandharva damsel in her past life. Grown vainglorious by her transitory charms, she heckled at the short stature of Agasthya one day, when he was returning from the temple after worship. With a view to teaching a lesson, he cursed her to turn into a yakshi with despicable traits. When appealed for his mercy through streaming eyes, he assured of her original form at the hands of Trisuli later. As she regained her original form and glamour here, she took her seat here permanently and started fulfilling the desires of her adorers. Visitors miss not worshipping this deity after praying to the Lord. There are some more niches within the prakara, like Vigneswara etc., and they are receiving prayers by public on their visits.

THE ARCHAMURTHI

The august Sivalinga is quite imposing and measures 5 feet in height. It is installed on a square shaped, two-foot-high beautiful Vedika. This huge, majestic Linga, when adorned with dazzling jewels and colourful garlands, looks extremely beautiful and transports the beholders to Kailas for a while, as it were. The glare of several brass lamps burning bright adds exceptional grace and heightens its loneliness. The Lord reveals himself here in three aspects everyday. During the mornings, he is decorated as Dhakshinamurthi-the giver of wisdom, and the pujas offered now is called Panthirathi puja. Darshan of this Jnanaswarupa makes the adorers wise and sharp-witted. In the noons, he appears in the form of Kirata - the fabled hunter who tested the might of Arjuna before bestowing Pasupatastra. Those who desire earthly advancement propitiate him with great fervour. Abishekam of any kind is highly desirable. In the evenings he gives darshan as Satchidananda. As this form exudes ananda, it is the auspicious moment for submitting long petitions for success of everything. All and sundry throng at this

hour. So the temple is always crowded from early morning till late in the evening. As the Lord developed preference for granting liberally all types of boons, the temple has been attracting thousands since the Tretayuga. Moreover, the free meal scheme has virtually converted it into a Dharmasala, and so, the Lord is reverentially addressed as the Annadana Mahaprabhu.

THE EPISODE OF LORD AS DRUMMER

More than feeding the hungry, he rushes with meteoric speed to the scene of calamity of his adorers on mere soulful mention of his sacred name. He rescues every devotee from both trivial and life-taking problems. At all hours and in all places. And appears in all forms. Here is an anecdote that changed him into a drummer at a particular annual festival at the tearful solicitation of a woman worshipper. It is told that once the Puthusseri family, dedicated to the Lord as the hereditary drummers, was bereft of a male member. There was only alone pregnant woman left in the house. In the annual festival, the services of a drummer were quite indispensable and the woman found her position miserable. Normally hereditary rights, if once relinquished cannot be got back, she did not venture forgoing the post. She poured out then her soul and let out a heart-rending wail in the night preceeding the Utsavabali. Her soulful prayers were heard by the Omni- compassionate Lord. Anon he spoke to her in the ethereal voice and advised to go herself to the temple and officiate as drummer. Fantastic! A woman drummer particularly at an important festival!! But how about the command from the above. She decided to obey the divine injunction. On the next day she took up the position and started. To the utter stupefaction of the priests and bystanders, she did her job to such perfection that her loud percussion sounds woke up the slumbering temple spirits, who approaching, demanded offerings from the priests with smacking lips. What all this! How could she perform it in such masterly way? When and where did she practice? None knew, but Bhagawan Bhaktavasankar knew all, and readily did, what

was needed. This illustrates how kind the lord is, and why the temple became so popular as a centre for instant success.

FESTIVALS

The temple celebrates many festivals. Among them, the 13-day Ashtami festival falling in the month of Vrischikam is given utmost importance. It attracts lacks of bhaktas from all parts, as it is the Vaikkathappan's dear most, auspicious festivals. As Ashtami falls on the 12th day and the Arattu on the 13th day these too have a great pull, when general rejoicing and display of devotion reach the zenith. Elephant processions, Kalakshepams, dance and drama with colour and sound entertain the devotees round the clock. Public feeding touches new height now. The 12th day is specially auspicious for the darsan of the Adidampatis; for, it was on this sacred day, Vyagrapada Maharshi was blessed with their darsan. So devotees overflow the vast courtyards from the early morning hour.

THE FATHER SON MEET

In addition, it is on this day, the deity of Lord Subrahmanya of the famous Udayanapuram temple lying about 3 km comes in procession to meet his father. This Vaikantappan and Udayanapurathappan meet is a grand occasion and is infinitely enjoyed by asthikas. According to belief, it is celebrated in memory of the auspicious moment of Subrahmanyas meeting his father-Lord Siva after his conquest over asuras. And it is on this symbolic meeting, the deities of several neighbouring shrines come to congratulate the son on his victory, and the father for begetting such a gem of rare brilliance surpassing that of the sun. The meeting of several dieties at this temple coming from far off places on gorgeously caparisoned elephants to the accompaniment of Nadaswaram together with thousands of torches speaks volumes of the glory of Vaikkathappan, the presiding deity of Vaikom temple and the nature of veneration extended to him. It is estimated that as

many as 100 tins of oil is consumed for lighting - up of 300 theevattis-torches during the procession of the 3 km long road. Indeed the grandeur and devotional fervour emerging from the celebration defies description. The devotees offer their mite in coins and enjoy that celestial meet to the maximum. After going round the temple along with the father, the son bids farewell for the day.

KOODI PUJA

On the 13th day, the function of arattu - ceremonial bath takes place at the tank called Arattukulam. Udayanapurathappan comes again for a joint bath at the Kulam, so the same fanfare is repeated. It is after bath, Koodi puja - Joint worship ceremony is conducted with several rituals lasting for hours. This is another unique tradition the temple has been observing since ages. As this time is deemed extremely auspicious, many asthikas prefer celebrating auspicious functions on this day. Several types of Vazhivadhuss are performed along with annaprasana and Tulabharam. Needless to repeat the heavy rush needs regulation by special squads of security personnel. Another interesting feature observable now is Vaikatappan's going to the seat of Udayanapurathappan at Udayanapuram following the Arattu ceremony. There again the holy bath and Koodi puja get repetition. Lusty participation of the devotees is seen here too. Another significant feature that surfaces now is the suspension of Naivedyam to the Mulavirat, since it is believed that the father observed fast on this day and prayed for his son's victory. But regular feeding goes on uninterrupted. And Lo! it is done on a grand scale with many special dishes. Sumptuousness reaches the point of satiety. Orthodoxy reigns suprême. Alas! the castaways are denied even the imagination of the stateliness of the celebrations, or privileges enjoyed by the chosen few. Hence the revolution for equality and lifting of the suppressed people.

Another popular offering is the Sandhya Vala - a special type of ritual spreading over 40 days, started generally before Astami

Festival. Siveli procession in the mornings, grand feasts at noon, and lakshadeeparchana in the nights are the regular features of this special puja. There used to be heavy competition between rulers like Travancore - Cochin and wealthy bhaktas for booking in advance for this puja, since it ensures many covetable benefits along with bliss. The finale becomes more relishable, if a pious episode occurred in the sublime life of an illustrious Nayanmar is recounted.

MANIKYAVACHAKAR'S EPISODE

Incidentally it throws light on the Lord's iron hand to the wrong doers and soft velvet heart to the genuine penitents. It happened-Manikyavachakar, a celebrated minister of the Pandyan king, visited Vaikom in the capacity of a Minister for buying horses, imported here from Arab countries, as it was a renowned harbour then. Being an expert in the art of Aswasastra he had a profitable deal and purchased several hundreds of horses for the king's army. Soon after the purchase, he made use of the temple premises for the horses stay without proper sanction from the authorities, presuming that the royalty is above law, and his dignified status would not be questioned. True, that earthly power may close its eyes against that unlawful intrusion, but the highest and mightiest power tolerates not such presumptuousness. The Lord surveying the large number of horses desecrating the pious campus, decided to teach the arrogant minister a lesson. On the next morning when the Minister went to see the horses bought, he found dogs. Realising his folly, he observed fast and prayed to the Lord for pardon. After special prayers, he sprinkled the holy thirtha on the barking beasts. What a miracle! The harsh barking at once changed into musical neighing. A reward for repentance; and punishment for transgression. The Lord of Vaikom kept the scales even. Why, he does always! Under all circumstances. His transcendental compassion transcends mine-thine considerations. And he rains bliss, if genuine soulful prayers are offered. This is the speciality of the Vaikom lord! And that accounts for its popularity!! And a fast growing and never failing consolation to the adorning community!!!

MOTHER RAJARAJESWARI OF CHOTTANIKARA

UNIQUENESS

"We don't negate God, but want proof tangible", argues the scientist, if theism turns up in conversation by accident. "God! damn that colourless, shapeless, odourless biped. Seeing is believing. Nothing exists that cannot be felt by sensory organs" roaring thus the Nasthika, tries to pull the temple towers down. To his own level! "How can an invisible creature assume such forms numberless, wield powers peerless, and live timeless. Rubbish! Nothing but fraud!!!" thumping on the table the rationalist dismisses the theist from his sight. "How absurd it is to spend lakhs of rupees on Kalyanothsavam of damnable black granite icons. It is nothing short of idiocy" shouting so, the iconolast advances with a hammer to smash them. These subtle denials, or loud protests, besides belittling the theists culminate in crashing down of the age-old sacred shrines and sucking out the lives of idolaters. They did score victory by word of mouth, or show of fist in some places for sometime. Alas! they never dared disproving the disastrous effects of the sub-human evil powers, affecting several thousands, either by possessing persons, or haunting the houses they lived in. Aren't the exorcists making a roaring business, in certain parts? Why then the witchcraft practised? Has not sorcery enjoyed its day! Hasn't the prevalence of Satanic forces proved and warded off with potent chants, pregnant with divinity and suffused with heavenly power? Weren't the wicked influences of evil spirits neutralised by the spiritual powers?

Evil spirits did exist and are existing, perhaps to nullify the futility of 'ISMS' or falsity of their contradictions. In certain places of worship, there are special rituals offered to the deities to screen the people from the evil powers. And look! these heavenly powers

cured successfully when invoked? Certainly the victims returned home completely relieved. All but due to the benign powers of the All-merciful heavenly power, ever succouring the helpless victims, which the labs cannot discern, nor rostrums grasp, however much they labour for centuries. God does exist, and is lifting the genuine adorers, just as the Satanic forces and harassing the star-crossed. Where there are the evil forces, there are heavenly powers. If the sceptics and coloured glasses still persist on clinging on to their conceited beliefs, none can help except that Universal MOTHER Rajarajeswari and her counterparts, who with their infinite might, are driving the Satan and his hordes into the trunks of trees or pillars of temples, their eternal graves to rot their for defying their persuasive injunctions to leave the victims by instant eviction. The dialogue that ensues between the divine and the devilish forces is quite awe-some rather hair-raising if seen and heard. And this certainly lifts the veil put on tanaceously by atheists and a wide variety of their broods like nonconformists, iconoclasts etc. This temple at Chottanikara has several unique features establishing the eternal truth that in as much as there are devils, there are gods or vice versa. This temple has successfully driven off terrifying dreadful devils possessing millions of people since its inception. It is here Dharmasasta is helping the presiding deity, MOTHER Rajarajeswari like a dutiful son in warding off minor elfins by driving nails into the pillars of his shrine to bind the harassing evil spirits; and preventing them from further evil plays; it is here trinkets filled with the sacred soil of the MOTHER'S pedestal are given to act as protective armours against evil spirits; it is this temple's Guruthi that fulfils many desires, and drives away evil spirits, if buried in the four corners of the houses; it is the Bhadrakali at Kizhakkavu of this temple renowned highly for releasing the victims once for all; it is this archamurthi exercising unlimited powers even without 'ashtabandana' or pratishtaapana rituals; it is here the MOTHER is installed along with the image of Narayana and receiving equal veneration; it is here the MOTHER is revealing in three different and distinct forms - Saraswathi, Bhadrakali and Durga; it is here Kannapan, a notorious dacoit turned into a holy priest on finding the

idols of Narayana and Devi; and it is this MOTHER who is saving the devout worshippers through ethereal voices, when approached.

Famous for enshrining the most potent images of Universal MOTHER and Narayana, warding off the fiercest evil forces; proffering relief through amulets and guruthi; worshipped by lakhs of possessed victims, this reputed temple is visited by a steady influx of adorers since ages, and deemed very popular next to that of the famous Guruvayur shrine.

ANTIQUITY

The exact period of construction of the shrines and its traditions are recorded elaborately in the Sthalapurana, and a casual reading convinces one to the infinitude of MOTHER'S powers. Though this temple does not claim heavenly connections, it has fantastic links with the devil spirits. And the number of beneficiaries it has on its list stuns the listers. As this august deity wiped out the hot tears of thousands and thousands of the possessed, she is thought of, and sought after, whenever trouble arises from the invisible evil forces. And visitation is advocated by one and all for sure cure. No victim ever returned home hope-lost, nor the possessing devil ever returned to its victims, if once it is seen by the fierce look of the MOTHER.

The origin of this temple is quite queer and imbued with mystery. This deity strangely enough emerged with the Abhayahastam and emancipated a seasoned bandit first, who knew robbing most and extorting best.

THE EPISODE OF KANNAPAN

According to the local history, the present town and its surroundings were but a thick forest infested with wild animals, wilder bigots and wildest naradhamas living by way lying and taking

out the valuable from the innocent travellers. Among them there lived a blood - thirsty bandit by same Kannapan. He was terror to the people, and created new records in ruthless extortion and torturous methods. He was a beef eater too. One night he managed to take a bulky cow home seizing it from a herdsman for slaughtering. But to his dismay, it disappeared into the forest snapping its tether. Anon he went in search of it and trekked miles and miles in the thick forest, but to no effect. He retraced his steps. When back home a pleasant surprise awaited him. To his infinite joy, he found the cow in his garden, caressing by his only daughter, the apple to his eyes - nay, his very breath. Nothing he liked most than this young lively lark, who used to regale him with her play and pranks during his short stays in the house. He cajoled her to be off from it as he intended to kill it instantly for food. She grew adamant. When his pleadings did not bear fruit, he descended to the nefarious course of cheating her with his sweet tongue. The innocent slept when he promised her not to touch it even. Alas! on waking up the child was given beef for breakfast. She could neither swallow it nor forgive her father. She died. This shocked him, and he grew remorse, why turned mad. But slowly he changed when he turned godwards for relief. That transformation reached climax, when the MOTHER Sakti appeared and informed him that she was the very same cow responsible for his daughter's death. She informed that his cow-shed where she was tethered would soon become a pilgrimage centre. Elated at the fortune he embarked upon making the place fit for her stay. During the excavation of the shed, he found the idols of Devi and Vishnu. His exultation ended in instant installation of them in a temple and it became very famous, in a very short period. He officiated as priest till his death. Not only he was benefitted by the MOTHER, but he became instrumental in changing the lives of victim of evil forces. After his death, due to lack of proper administration, with regard to conduct of pujas and maintenance, it once again joined the dust from where it emerged. The place too was deserted.

EMERGENCE OF DEVI AND NARAYANA

After centuries, it appears a harijan woman, who reached this spot for cutting grass, came across a divine treasure while she started sharpening her sickle on a stone-she found to her horror the stone bleeding profusely. She shrieked with such horror that people rushed to the spot. They were dumb-founded at the blood. Being illiterates, they hastened to inform this miracle to the learned Nambudri. Inspecting the place, he inferred rightly too that there was some super natural power permeating, and it was auspicious for the construction of temple. Consultations and astrological readings by intellectual spiritualists went on in quick succession. All agreed that the stone be worshipped as MOTHER and the adjoining one as Narayana. Poojas according to sastric injunctions went on forth with. Edathu Nambudri was chosen by all to act as priest. Under his tantriship, the place developed in all directions and emerged as a premier shrine for the worship of Sakti. A trust was formed with leading Nambudris to maintain and improve the temple. Many spiritualists served the MOTHER with unparalleled dedication, and raised its glory to the highest pinnacle. The presiding deity too wielded her power through timely advice. Here is an episode that demonstrates her passion for rewarding the genuine selfless services and preference for devout adorers.

DEVI REWARDING INTEGRITY

Once, the Trust appointed Aiyinaked Nambudri of Kurumbranad as manager. He was an official with any enviable qualities of head and heart. His dedication was second to none but itself. He was a tireless worker, who attended to the spiritual progress of the temples round the clock. In the total absorption of the prayer services, he found little time to maintaining the temple accounts, for which alone he was appointed primarily. His slackness in this aspect came up for discussion during the yearly budget session, called Eswara Seva. Unable to realise his integrity, the

trustees became wild and wet to the extent of dismissing him on charges of misappropriation of funds. The news reached him. Anon he stood up and ripped open his heart to the MOTHER and prayed for her impartial verdict. And Lo! at once an ethereal voice spoke in resonant voice, "He is not guilty. I am satisfied with his dedication more than the maintainance of accounts. I resent action against him". Ah! what a compassion! How much compensation for honest service!! Will the MOTHER ever let down her own genuine worshippers? The dumb-founded Trustees returning to the real world rewarded him with the Trusteeship. Do the springs of devotion ever go dry? Every pain ends in gain. Ordeals always display the inner worth. He served the Goddess meritoriously till his death, and built up new traditions for future Trustees. After his demise in 1064 AD, the Cochin Government took over the administration of the temple. As the rulers were reputed thiests, they made many improvements and attended to renovation programmes periodically. It is during their reign, Srikoil, Nalambalam, golden flag-staff, anapandal, Bhajanpura, Mandapam etc. received full attention. They breathed full fresh life into every segment of temple administration. No wonder the regal touch it received made it surpass many other ancient temples of the state. After Independence, its administration was passed on to State Dewaswom Board. Whoever manages, or however it is managed, its glory never diminishes as long as MOTHER Rajarajeswari's benign looks screen the victims from the evil spirits. Though there are similar shrines in Kerala famous in this respect, they pale into insignificance before this august MOTHER and so she raises her position next to that of the Guruvayur temple among the shrines of Kerala. Now step into the sanctum to see for yourself what a power the Goddess is possessing and what kind of sports she is playing with the possessing devils.

THE TEMPLE COMPLEX

The most singular feature that characterises this august shrine is that there are three deities in one and the same compounds and

all the relieving the victims from the evil spirits. No where such feature is seen in Kerala, or India for that matter.

This shrine like its counterparts has big a prakara, Anapandal, Nalambalam, Srikoil and Bhajanapura etc. Moreover it is built in a spacious sprawling ground. Due to munificent royal patronage it enjoyed, every structure is quite imposing with unusual in dimensions, besides majestic in appearance. Its distinctive speciality lies in having a separate, independent shrine for each one of the three august deities built almost adjacent to one another in the vast prakara. And each deity is endowed with similar power and is dealing with the wicked spirits, each in its own way within its might. But MOTHER Rajarajeswari's say is final. Her powers are infinite and accepted ever with mute submission, as a matter of fact. When her benignity is sought for, she assigns the cases either to Bhadrakali at Kizhakavu or Dharmasashta according the temper of the possessing spirit and its tenacious grip over the victims.

THE ARCHAMURTHI

The first thing that strikes the eye in the Srikoil is the installation of MOTHER'S icon on a pedestal built over loose soil for a purpose specific and benefit public. As the soil in constant touch with the august deity it shares divinity, rather the MOTHER'S benignity is saturated in it. So the soil is used to fill the trinkets given to the adorers. The four-foot-high laterite icon is bereft of well sculptured shape and features. It is Swayambhu and its shape can be seen only in the mornings before the Nirmalayam rituals. When the idol is decorated with golden raiment and garlands together with dazzling jewels, she looks enchantingly beautiful. She reveals in four arms with disc and conch in upper arms, the lower right arm in abhayamudra and the left in viradamudra poses. This picturesque beauty of the MOTHER is enhanced by the myriad lights burning bright around. A look at the Varadahasta and Abhayamudra itself ensures sure relief and the victims feel that the Goddess would certainly emancipate them. She is adored in three different forms -

Saraswathi in the mornings, draped in immaculate white garments; Bhadrakali at noons, dressed then in crimson red and Durga in the evenings, donned in bright blue dress. On account of these three aspects, she is called Rajarajeswari. Every aspect consoles and assures sure cure to the possessed people. On the same pedestal, a two-foot high image is placed and is called Narayana. So they are reverentially called Lakshmi-Narayana by devout adorers. The devotees let out loud sounds, "Amme Narayana and Devi Narayana" as they enter the Sannidhi. It is believed that the abhisheka water flowing underground joins the thritha of the Onakkur Bhagawathi - another powerful Goddess, situated off at about a furlong and a half, percolating underneath the loose soil of the alter, reaches the Sannidhi of Bhagawati to heighten her powers, when the possessed worship her. Scanning them from head to foot, she bids them to go to Dharma Sasta shrine, situated on the north-east side of the temple, if it is a mischievous minor spirit for cure, or directs them to worship at Kizhakavu Bhadrakali shrine lying outside the main temple, if it is of sterner stuff, and reserves for herself the perverse and deadly spirits harassing the victims for long and subjecting them to untold sufferings.

During the course of exorcising, there develops awful altercation between the MOTHER and the possessing spirit. At times if at all any naughty wicked spirit refuses to leave her victim showing stubbornness saying "No, No I will not go", MOTHER roars", "Go you must, and be gone anon!" That ear-splitting shout slits the heart of the spirit and it goes at once. And for ever. The victim coming to the world offers harshabash pabhishekam - worships through shedding tears of joy; and proclaims that there is no Swarga other than this temple, and no God higher and kinder than MOTHER Rajajajeswari. This relief and cure may not be obtained instantly, or at the first sitting itself. It may come after a week or two, but the outcome is as sure as the sun rises in the east. Nothing exists beyond the MOTHER, nor anything eludes her grasp and grip. Some of the victims receive from the priest charms-amulets filled with the soil of the MOTHER'S alter, since they act as armour

against evil spirits. It is the priest that acts as medium throughout the tussle that ensures between the victims on one side and the MOTHER at the other side-MOTHER speaks through the priest.

The procedure at the Bhadrakali Alayam has one or two more extras. The Bhadrakali by assuming fierce aspect and raising voice drives the spirit once for all, and it is signified by the falling of victim unconscious. There is another practice of driving nails by the victim into the paala tree grown on the north side of the shrine for relief. And it is done at the instance and guidance of the priest. The victim drives one or two nails into the paala tree hitting them with fist or head against them. In some cases the priest enjoins the offering of Guruthi - a solution made out of turmeric and lime water to the deity. Normally those who hanker after material objects and worldly prosperity offer this. There is heavy rush for this offering, and one has to book for it in advance; moreover it is offered only on Tuesdays and Fridays. Devotees carry this Guruthi home for burying it in the four corners of their dwelling to ward off the visitation of evil forces.

SASTHA'S ROLE

In the Dharmasasta shrine, the modus operandi adopted for driving out of the spirit differs slightly. Here the nails are driven into the pillars of the temple instead of the paala tree as in Bhadrakali Alayam. His coming to the temple and getting this honorific joyous job has an interesting background. According to the legend, once MOTHER Rajeswari went in procession to Moppazhur on the regular work of getting para-offering of paddy by the cultivators of temple lands. On the way some Nasthikas created troubles to the following bhaktas and the temple officials. The Moppazhur Nambudri scenting further harassment on the return trip, sent Dharma Sasta, his family deity to give escort to the processionists. All went well, and later he settled down here itself in the service of the MOTHER, deeming it a special privilege to be with her. A separate shrine was built and the dignified office of exorcist was

assigned to him. Here he is revealing as Grihastha - married man, with his two wives-Purna and Pushkala on the right and left sides.

Another object worthy of veneration is a sacred platform called pavizhamallithara, where it appears, the MOTHER was found first and seen by the Pulaya woman. Visitors adore this too. The place that lures the bhaktas next is the Siva shrine lying to the South-west of the temple. The images of Nagadevatha and a yakshi are installed here, besides Lord Siva.

THE STORY OF YAKSHI

The Yakshi has an awe-some tale to tell. And it is MOTHER Rajarajeswari that saved an innocent adorer from the clutches of this terrible Yakshi. In memory of that event, her image is installed here.

According to story, once a pious Nambudri by name Guptan belonging to Kandarapalli Illom chanced to meet a phantom of beauty, on his way to Tripunithura one full moon night. She was found to be an engrossing piece of beauty who contrived to drag him into the cob-web of her captivating charms with sweet talk. Flashing sweet smiles and talking musciously she sought his company to reach Tripunithura along with him. Enslaved, as it were by her tall, slim form and magnetic oval shaped face, embellished with almond eyes, coral lips and flabby, rosy cheeks, the dove-like Nambudri okayed and led her upto his guru's house at Kosappalli on the way. Asking her to wait near the house, he went inside to hand over a holy book to his guru. He expressed his anxiety to go soon to keep up the word given to his chance companion. The guru being a highly learned scholar asked explanation, and after seeing the waiting woman in the verandhah of his house, he explained the dangerous position he was in. He advised him to run forthwith to Chottanikara shrine and fall at the feet of MOTHER Rajarajeswari, who alone could release him from the clutches of that terrible yakshi in the garb of a ravishing female. Accordingly he started running towards Chottanikara

temple. The yakshi too followed him running. As advised the artless Nambadri placing one foot into the temple dropped behind the chanted wet cloth given by his guru for protection. But the yakshi caught hold of him by the other leg and used its might to pull him out for devouring instantly. Falling down, he uttered 'Amme Narayana' loudly. The compassionate MOTHER rushing to the spot grabbed the running yakshi and cutting her into two pieces threw them into the temple tank. The water at once turned red, and still it is retaining that colour. It is called Raktakulam. Needless to prolong, the Nambudri was saved and this event when reached far and wide brought thousands of the possessed victims to the MOTHER'S temple for cure. And every case was a success and hence the fame spread to the four corners that Rajarajeswari Mata is peerless among the goddesses with similar powers to warding off evil spirits and her compassion is matchless. Thousands and thousands of devotees visit this place either for cure, or to offer prayers after relief, in token of gratitude. The number of the haunted, mentally afflicted, possessed etc. is a legion. It is indeed a sight to see on Fridays during the noon pooja, when the whole temple reverberates with the sounds of Amme Narayana and Devi Narayana' shouted at the highest pitch by the afflicted persons. The beating of drums and clanging of bells during the dialogue between the divine power and the evil powers and the horrors following the eviction of spirits are to be seen and believed than to be recounted and described.

It is the appropriate time for the atheists to pay a visit to assess and realise what powers-good and bad are there existing in this world and how they are at war with each other which certainly transcend test-tube proofs and verbal protests and contests. If 'To see is to believe' logic is trusted and honoured, the non-believers must necessarily visit this shrine atleast once for full illumination, when it can be inferred that they declare a permanent holiday to the hair-splitting arguments and fisticuffs, sustaining them ever since the flicker of perversion that alas is keeping them off the track. Visitation ensures illumination, and realisation assures emancipation.

MOTHER KALI OF KODUNGALLUR

PREFACE

The job of creation is anything but joyous and entertaining; it is arduous, irksome, exacting, onerous, complex, enervating, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. The office of Brahma is accorded the first and highest importance, for the primary reason that everything else comes into being and starts functioning only after creation. Deep thought, strenuous effort and atmic powers go into creation. Hence the emergence of things, bright and beautiful, potent and purposeful, glorious and glamorous; colourful and artful etc. They are serving the created beings and justifying the purpose of creation and existence. It took, perhaps, yugas to conceive, create and breathe life into every object existing both in chaos and cosmos. The Creator's job defies description.

Ironically such marvellous work comes to stand still or becomes jeopardised with a single word or simple gesture. Which is that potent force and how can it set at nought the whole created worlds, and wherefrom does it originate, deserve reverent study, although, its impact is seen, felt, upheld, adored and advocated. More than man, every Bharatanari heard it, assimilated it and so she is ardently striving to obtain it, but feels it impossible since that exemplary ideal is going further and further as she approaches nearer and nearer it in this west crazy mod world. Does that mean it is a thing of the past and realisation will be a mirage? Is it confined to Utopia? Certainly not! It can be obtained effortlessly with will power provided sincerity and tenacity go hand in hand; for this miraculous power is made of simple ingredients - chastity and piety. Chastity - devoted to the wedded man, or matrimonial fidelity binds woman to this world, and piety lifts her to the world above. Despite

seemingly simplest of the simplests, its inherent power can mar the arrogant unjust power, and bar the mightiest force with a mere word of single stare.

Our literature embodies copious evidence in proof of that mightest power, embedded in illustrious women, such as Sadhvi Savitri outwitting the formidable God of Death and obtaining several boons, besides breathing life into her dead husband; Mahasati Anusuya, commanding the movements of the Sun and Moon together with making the Omnipotent Trio into toddlers; Seelavathi Sita destroying whole brood of Rakshasas, Pativrata Damayanti united with her Lord along with his Rajyalakshmi. And many such invaluable gems strewn hither and thither across our punya Bharat, have been lighting up the worlds since they left this world. Not only the creative literature but historical records embody the glory of chastity through several episodes. One among such dazzling diamonds encompassing the fortunes of three imperial kingdoms of the South lies here enshrined at Kodungallur and is receiving adoration both my men and godmen along with the Goddess Kali, the Omnipotent MOTHER, reputed for ridding the world of the menace of Daruka.

UNIQUENESS

This shrine where MOTHER Kali is worshipped with boundless devotion is enshrining the image of Kannaki, who with her potent curse burnt the city of Madurai in addition to killing of that unjust Pandyan King instantly; it is this shrine containing a secret chamber treasuring up the material remains of that Mahasadhvi Kannaki; whose sacred name brought undying fame to Cholas, deathless notoriety to the Pandyas and immortality to Cheras; it is this temple's life size wooden image adored as Kali embodying the potent aspect amsas of the six indomitable Gods- Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswara, Subrahmanya, Yama and Indra; it is this temple's image of Kannaki made from the holy stone brought from the Himalayas by Senguttavan and was installed in the presence of mightly imperial

monarch; it is this island temple that guided the fortunes of Cheras; it is here the images of Saptamatrukas receiving adoration along with the archamurthi; it is this temple city once enjoyed the status of metropolitan city of the valorous Cheras for centuries; it is this temple that kept its doors open to all castes including panchamas long before the Temple entry legislation came into force; it is here celebrated the famous Cock festival when several thousands of cocks were sacrificed to the Goddess Kālī; it is here installed a twelve-foot-high kshetrapala's image, a rarity among the Kali temples; it is here the much despised Goddess Vasurimala, the cause of contagious diseases was tamed, and subdued before installation, and it is here the dreadful demon Daruka was killed by MOTHER Kali, created by Lord Siva with his phalanetra.

Sanctified by the installation of imposing images, renowned as the only shrine Where Harijans enjoyed admission before the legislation, treasuring up the material remains of an ideal historic Sati Kannaki, eulogised in sacred lore as the kshetra where Daruka met with his death, patronised by illustrious imperial monarchs, popular as a largely visited Sakti Pita, this Kodungallur Kali shrine is liberating thousands and thousands of devotees over centuries, particularly from the days of imperial Cheras.

ANTIQUITY

The antiquity of this far-famed shrine embodies certain incongruous elements with regard to the names of the asuras killed, and the Goddess who killed them. As they battle the credibility by their contradictory claims, authenticity eludes the grasp, but not the divinity of the images worshipped, nor the sanctity they infused through several awe-inspiring events created through miracles and mysteries. Perhaps to make every spot holy, and people god-minded, the highly evolved souls consecrated images in places where they deemed spiritual regeneration was most needed. The creative writers inspired by eternal values, strove by flights of imagination to justify the claims put forth by saint-seers and nation builders. So

mute acceptance of the legends brings consolation and paves ways for realisation than the hair - splitting arguments, producing more heat than light, only to end up in smoke. Among the many, it is this Kali that killed Daruka utilising the powers imparted to her by Lord Siva in addition the other six powerful gods, whereas it was Durga responsible the death of Mahishashra, the other name for Daruka. Although the place of action or names of persons differ, the suppression of evil is certain. If proceeded bearing this in mind, the place becomes visit - worthy and deities, adorable.

Now begins the story. The deva danava yuddha prolonged indefinitely, at times asuras subjugating the suras, or the vanquished turning victors with the help of Trio. In one of the battles the asuras were totally put to rout rather exterminated except two females - Danamati and Darumati. That unlucky two prayed to Lord Brahma for reestablishment of their sway through proper progeny. Lord Brahma advised them to marry Mani Rudra and beget children to fulfil their ambitious. They obeyed. In due course Daruka and Karaka were born to Darumati and Danamati respectively. Darumati being over ambitious, advised her son to propitiate Lord Brahma with great ardour for boons. He did. Brahma granted him invincibility as desired against either by man, beast, Surasura, or weapon of any type, at any point of time. He was infinitely gratified, but Lord Brahma reminded that he was not free from woman. Over jubilant Daruka laughed away saying that no special power was needed to subdue the weak vessels. Soon Daruka entered the war theatre and retrieved what was lost by his ancestors. For gods, it opened an era of agony and humiliation when the afflicted poured out their hearts, the six powerful gods - Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswar, Subrahmanya, Yama and Indra created six goddesses and imparted their powers to them before sending to the war field. Alas they were no match to their formidable Daruka, Thereupon, Lord maheswar opened his third eye and created Bhadrakali to meet the situation. Nothing stands against that force. Daruka bit the dust. Soon after danava samhara, Bhadrakali still at the height of fury approached Lord Siva in her frenzied mood. To appease and pacify her, Lord

Siva created two kids to suckle and cajole her by their charms and pranks. Target missed. Then the Lord began his inimitable Bhujangatrasa nitrya, and that spectacle not only cooled her, but made her the Lord's dancing partner. Kroda was dissolved and Karuna triumphed.

And the two infants were named Virabhadra and Kshetrapala. Later, Virabhdra went to mount Kailas to be with the Lord, whereas Kshetrapala remained here with Bhadrakali. Hence a separate shrine for this 12-foot-high image of that great son, which lies on the north east side of the entrance. The other goddesses who also waged a relentless war against Daruka were installed in a separate big shrine. Here along with the six, there is one more added for MOTHER Kali. Hence this place is called Saptamatrukas. The deities are adorned with four arms and are facing north. They are in sitting posture, and are adored with equal fervour by the devotees seeing them through the three doors as done in the case of Anantapadmanabhaswamy temple at Tiruvananthapuram. The Goddess in the Srikoil is very majestic and is revealing in fierce aspect with eight arms and represents the Srisakti - the cause of Chaitanya in every object including the highest divinity. Patibhakti represented by Kannaki adored here along with her material remains treasured up in a chamber in the Srikoil itself. Now comes the history and it starts during the golden days of Senguttuvan's imperial power.

THE KANNAKI AND KOVALAN EPISODE

Among the immortal tales adorning the pages of history, the Kannaki Kovalan's story occupies an important place, and has been shining resplendent like pole star since its occurrence. All the genres of literature justified their existence in eulogising the chastity, the ideal of Bharatanari exemplified and demonstrated by this immortal woman. Kings and institutions seemed vied with one another in perpetuating their adorable life by erecting monuments, staging entertainments and holding fairs. Tamil Nadu topped the list and

succeeded to projecting the glory of the Indian womanhood in an inimitable way. The Poompuhar Memorial is a standing tribute that brought them fame, and divinity to the couple. Kerala, where Kannaki committed self immolation is also honoured in an outstanding manner by the then imperial monarch Senguttuvan, by not only immortalising her in literature, but installing her image in a temple in the presence of emperors and illustrious men of his day like the King of Ceylon. His efforts ended in deifying that gem of woman. She is now worshipped in the temple along with MOTHER Kali more or less on equal and same footing. All but due to her devotion to her wedded Lord. That is the glory of chastity and sanctity of Hindu Dharma.

The story begins in Pukhar, the capital of Cholas. There lived here two cultured families noted for their aristocratic way of life, excelling that of many ruling princes. Their wealth was of no mean distinction. Each had a young member ready for marriage, Kannaki, the sublime, domestic type of woman was wedded to Kovalan, the romantic young cultured man of his day. The match was deemed extremely matched in status, standing, reputaion etc. The river of their romance flowed majestically and smoothly like the Ganges and delighted all. But there joined them a jingling rivulet on their way. She was Madhavi belonging to a class that glitters day in and day out. Poor Kovalan lured by her gurgling giggle was caught in the whirl pool of Madhavi's charms. Kannaki like Saraswathi flowed underground for sometime. Soon after denuding Kovalan, Madhavi changed her route. Kannaki seeing the stagnated water getting deried up cleansed it with her pure water and diverted the course, for keeping up honour and retrieving the former glory.

To the penitent Kovalan, she give her invaluable anklet to dispose of for turning a new leaf with the money obtained from selling it. When the dove-like Kovalan went out on that commission, he met a hawk in the form of a gold-smith, who after defrauding the queen's anklet was on the look-out to involving a gullible man to foist his guilt on him, and breathe freely. Kovalan fell into this net. The goldsmith showing the anklet to the King and succeeded in

passing on his guilt to Kovalan. The power mad king ordered the execution of Kovalan sans enquiry and witness.

Hearing the death of her Lord, Kannaki transformed herself into Mahakali, and dashed into the court of the Pandyan king, frightened the King and audience with her eyes splitting fire and mouth letting out flames. Dashing against the ground her another anklet filled with diamonds against the queen's loaded with pearls, she proved that her Lord was guiltless, and cursed death on the King and devastation to the Madurai city. The frightened king died in his throne, and the court and palace started falling and burning at once. Emerging out from the court she tore off her left breast and threw it in the streets for total annihilation. She then appeared more fierce than Bhadrakali, fuming with rage and fluttering in uncontrollable emotion. Leaving the burning, Madurai behind, she reached Chenkunnu in distant Kerala and committed self immolation to join her departed Lord in heaven. The reigning king Senguttuvan considering her as the incarnation of Mother Kali decided to erect a fitting memorial with all due publicity. Being a king famous for his theistic leanings, he made a beautiful image of Kannaki from a superior stone brought by himself from the Himalayas on his successful return from the conquest of the North, and installed it in the temple. He raised Kannaki to the level of divinity and praised her as the kodungallur Amma and the guardian deity of the Chera, worthy of eternal soulful adoration. His deification reached finale with the consecration of her image with unusual pomp and splendour, attended by many outstanding kings and monarchs including the reigning dignitaries like the King of Ceylon, Gajabahu. And treasuring up her material remains in a secret chamber in the garbhagriha of MOTHER Kali. A befitting honour! And a memorable memorial!! By honouring that immaculate chaste Sati, he honoured his well-nurtured culture, so is honoured by the future generations. His eldest brother Ilango Adigal immortalised this remarkably divine Kannaki Kovalan romance in his celebrated work Silappadikaram, which is as popular as the epics of our Punya Bharat. This epic rightly establishes that chastity was not monopolised by the Vedic women, nor is it a mirage. Ilango Adigal

immoralised himself with this imperishably glorious work too. Are not pen and book superior to the spirit and matter?

THE TEMPLE

This island temple enshrining the representations of Srisakti and Patibhakti located almost in the centre of the island is occupying about ten acres of sprawling grounds. The picturesque flora surrounding the temple casts an irresistible charm on the visitors and lifts them to ethereal regions. Kokasandesa, an immortal Sanskrit work embodies a rich corpus about the glory it enjoyed in the early days, and it was called as Kurumbakavu then.

ARCHAMURTHI

It is quite interesting to learn that this temple of Kali was dedicated to Lord Siva in the beginning, and later a majestic six-foot high wooden image of Kali facing the north was installed. Now both are adored in separate shrines. According to belief this imposing idol was made out of the trunk of a single jack fruit tree. It has eight arms and is holding different kinds of potent weapons. The Kirita adorning her head resembles that of kathakali type and is heightening the grandeur of her awe-some beauty. She is covered with golden raiment all over excepting hands. The dazzling diamond decked necklaces and chains, sparkling by the rays of koil lamps hung up around, enhance her beauty and wring veneration at first sight. It is the same form, she assumed during the war against Daruka - fearful, yet approachable. It is in this Srikoil, the much venerated secret chamber lies. It is made of a big boulder and supposed to contain in its hollow material remains of Kannaki. Strangely enough it has neither entrances nor windows, but believed to have an underground passage from here which opens at about hundred yards away. It is shut and an enclosure is erected around. It is held in high esteem that nobody ever entered it, nor knew what it contained. Moreover, none is allowed to probe into its mysteries. There is hung up a crimson cloth against its western wall and it is

adored with lighting of lamp and singing of hymns. Even the highest dignitary including the priest, never went beyond this point.

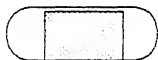
The next adorable objects here are the Saptamatrukas installed in a hall adjoining the Srikoil. The kshetrapalaka image lies in the courtyard on the north east side. It is a twelve foot high image that beckons attention by its mere size and shape. It represents one of the two infants created by Lord Siva to suckle the breast of MOTHER Kali to appease his roudra. And according to another version he was created by Lord Siva to assist the goddess Kali to organise the army in the war fought against Daruka. Here on the south west there is shrine for Vasurimala believed to be the cause of epidemics and contagious diseases. Thousands were killed from small-pox etc., when she asserted her evil form. To arrest such calamity, MOTHER Kali on subdising, confined her to a small shrine. Devotees worship her with sprinkling of turmeric powder with injunctions not to harass anyone thereafter. Devotees offer prayers to this deity. And sometimes guruthi is also offered. These are the deities receiving veneration from the visitors since the beginning.

FESTIVALS

Talappoli and Bhavani are the two major festivals, the temple conducts with great pomp and splendour every year. The former lasting for 4 days is famous for its colourful pageantry, and the latter for about a month for ritualistic offerings. Both lure thousands and thousands every year. Talappoli is akin to the Pongal festival celebrated in Tamilnadu and Andhra. It is a harvest festival when gaiety reaches its highest height with fire works and lusty participation, mostly by working class, when they flock during this time. The elephant procession starting from the Kurubayamma shrine lying at about half a Km is a grand occasion when an array of gaily dressed women carry trays with coconuts and rice for offering to the MOTHER. The usual paraphernalia - chamaram, avalotiam accompanied by sound and light lend unusual charm to the festivities and entertain all classes of people.

The Bharani festival lasting for about a month falls in the month of Kumbham corresponding to Feb-March, has a greater pull since it has many special features. It is during then the temple is supposed to get desecrated due to observance of certain rituals when the regular Nambudri priests carry the behest of the non-brahmin temporary priests belonging to goldsmith community. Sacrifice of cocks is one as such and it is very common and thousands of them are offered. Hence it is called fittingly the cock festival. It is to be dominated by Nair community, who had the privilege of inaugurating, it with throwing the packets of turmeric, peper, coins, coconuts and live cocks into the temple precincts prior to Bharani. A non-brahmin enters the garbhagriha and offers Trichandanapoticharta i.e smearing the idol with holy sandal powder when all the doors kept closed. After this ritual lasting for nearly three hours, the doors are flung open for darsan to outsiders - pilgrims only. The senior Raja of Kodungallur standing on the platform in front of the eastern portico spreads out a green umbrella signifying the time for entering into the temple for darsan. The waiting devotees rush in and avail the darsan and receive prasadam. On the Bharani day, at about 3 AM the non-brahmin priest enters the Srikoil and offers pujas with payasam made specially for this. Then follows the offering of cocks along with other puja materials. Several rituals follow on Karthika day, the ninth day of Bharani. The temple hitherto polluted with the entry of non-brahmin priests, receive purificatory rites in well swept and neatly kept shrines, niches and their surroundings. Once again Nambudris hold their sway and perform routine services. Devotees offering prayers receive prasad before departure. The Bharani festival falling in March-April is the time for special prayers to MOTHER Kali for good rains to start their agricultural operations. So lacs of people congregate, offer prayers and participate in this festival with full gusto. The temple town thus goes gay for about a month during this festival.

It is a miss not time! A grand occasion!! And a soul-lifting experience.



KUTALAMANIKYAM

IRINJALAKUDA

UNIQUENESS

A temple for Bharata? Incredible! Impossible!! Unheard of!!! Sure, incredible in this materialistic modern world, where Mammon worship has taken precedence over the ever adorable virtues of dedication, selflessness and gratitude of eternal significance. The very recognition more than conception of the glorious role Bharata played, and the monumental sacrifice he demonstrated deserve whole-hearted obeisance. And any aspiration aimed at the perpetuation of that memory through a shrine, accessible to all classes of people with a view to radiating selflessness, instil brotherly kinship, inculcate loyalty and inspire renunciation with a mere single sight, is beyond the powers of common imagination, and merits prostrations, not once, but times numberless. Of the characters portrayed by that celebrated Adikavi Valmiki, depiction of Bharata's role is peerless: of course, comes next to that of Rama's for delineation of such immortal character in that masterly way, the creative faculty of all ages, all countries and all forms in its entirety bends its head!

Bharata of that celebrated poet, when emerged in flesh and blood from his palm leaf manuscript, dazzled and dazzled that none but himself could stand equal as younger, loyal, regal brother at whose feet altruism falling flat confesses its inferiority. He is the gem of a man for whom dharma comes first and self next. He is the personification of selflessness - a solidified nissverthajivi and a mobile Swarthathyaga with none to stand before him in that form and role. Listen! he simply spurned the Sarvabhoutmatva of Kosala desa wrung from the senile but, duty- bound Rajadhiraja Dasaratha

openly and rudly, expressing his contempt at such extortion; pleaded with streaming eyes for Rama's return to the throne; accepted at last, under heaviest pressure to be the deputy of the legitimate ruler for a long period of 14 years; carried the Ramapadukas on head all thorough the way to Ayodhya, installed them with due reverence as the insigma of the exiled brother's sceptre; led an ascetic life for full 14 years in a parnasala shunning publicity and eschewing conjugal comforts and imperial privileges; and above all prepared to jump into blazing fire in the event of the brother's failure to turn up on the expiry of the fixed moment to relieve him from royal obligations.

Now look to his radiant face lighted up by the inner joy emerging to surge forward to merge with the streaming joyous tears of his affectionate elder brother Srirama in whom he saw his father, mother, King and God in ideal state. His entire physical frame thrilled with inexplicable joy at Hanuman's communication of the successful return of Srirama after dustasamhar. The infinite joy welling up in eyes and fluttering of heart for meeting of the long-absent brother are conceived and represented in the face by the masterly sculptured archamurthi of this shrine of Kutalamanikyam at Irinjalakuda. The Mulavirat-Bharat's facial expression represents that inexplicable joy for his happy union with the brother.

This single, solitary, sublime shrine enshrining the image of ideal Bharata in that anxious mood is the only one of that kind built for Bharata in the whole of Jumbudwipa, nor is there any other exclusively built for any purpose in any mood in India or abroad. This lone Bharata shrine is a unique one and has many other uniques found in the holy shrine. Credit goes to the genius of Kearalites for conceiving that memorable part; building a grand shrine; and adoring with exemplary way that worshipful model brother in a sublime shrine that is luring thousands of devotees throughtout the year. To be true, a greater part of the merit gained by worshipping this Lord goes to them unknown to the worshipper, for they alone have created and preserved the rich tradition of

expression of gratitude to the person due. No state in India claims the privilege of building a temple, nor deemed it fit even to instal him in separate niche. Although, Bharata is adored along with the three others of his brothers in several places, he is not adored in a separate, individual independent temple. Kerala's gifted talent did it. And showed it in a spectacular way. Hats off to Kerala, and prostration to that redoubtable Jamadagni's son Parasuram, whose brilliance permeating the whole land inspired several such innovative notions, amongst which this tops the list.

THE TEMPLE COMPLEX

Let us now enter that gift of Kerala and see what other special features it is treasuring up in and out of the temple complex. Among the marvels it embodies, the temple kitchen merits mention first. It is aid that for the arriving srirama and party, cooking was done by hundreds of persons, and among them Hanuman was the chief; for, he wanted to serve the best and delicious dishes to his Lord cooked with his hands. So joined the cooks. And since then he is spiritually present in the kitchen and helping the cooks in preparing naivedyam etc. in gargantuan vessels requiring the service of many persons; but thanks to Hanuman, now only a single cook attends to lifting, and transferring, and he does all single-handed with utmost ease. To whom else one can account for this miracle except to daivasakti - rather Hanuman's bhakthi; further it is this temple that does not find niches for Upadevathas, nor even to Ganesh to receive prayers and reward the adorers for trouble - free completion of work undertaken; it is here in the temple tank called Kulipini thirtham fishes are venerated, as evidenced in the observance of Meenattu ritual - feeding the sacred fish that resulted in prohibiting the bathing in it by the visiting asthikas; it is here offering of Vazhuthananga Naivedyam - brinjal oblation is deemed best and thought first, and is reputed to cure stomach disorders; it is here banned the offering of every flower-except lotuses, tulasi and chett; it is this temple tank that does not contain any acquantic

creature like frog, snake etc. except fish; it is here offered only three pujas a day - Etirthu Puja; Uchcha Puja and Athazha Puja against the common practice of five offered everywhere; it is here the daily siveli ritual - procession of deity is prohibited; is here the famous Mukkidi - an Ayurvedic mixture is offered to the deity and given as prasad - a panacea for every stomach ailment, it is into this archamurthi the powers of several deities of Kerala temples merged, when the conch shell of a certain yogi fell, and hence the Lord is called Sangameswara; it is this temple's image found along with other three on the sea shore, and was brought for worship by one Vakkey Kaimal according to Lord's injunction in dream; it is this Mula Virat resembling Lord Mahavishnu, in revealing himself with conch, disc, mace and rosary; it is this deity that absorbed a bright ruby of a local chief, When brought near for identification of the source of light emanating from its forehead; more-prominently it is here the sage Kulipini did dhirga tapas and made the Lord dwell here permanently; and finally to this divya kshetra the river Ganges descended to inundate a vast area to form into a sacred tank.

Rich in such divine associations; abounding in several distinctive features; enshrining the only image of such kind in the entire Bharata, consecrated by the ethereal presence of the Maharshis; drenched by the sacred waters of the river Ganges, this singular thirtha is blessing the worshippers with a wide variety of boons that are instrumental in attracting a steady influx of pilgrims throughout the year.

ANTIQUITY

This kshetra was nothing but a dense forest of sumptuous growth of tall, huge, trees with thick foliage, pleasant to sight, and fit for mediation in the past. Lured by its unusual tranquility, Kupilini, a Maharshi of supreme spiritual powers, came down here with his disciples and their families for permanent settlement. As conditions proved very favourable they performed many yagas and led a sequestered graceful life. With a view to enhancing the glory of the

secluded place, he desired the eternal presence of Sri Mahavishnu here. So he performed penance for years, and it pleased the Lord by its intensity and sublimity. He appeared before him and asked to spell out his aspiration to be granted at once. Simple and sedate as he was by nature and practice, he prayed to him modestly, "My Lord you bestowed on me everything, so I have nothing to aspire for, expect to offering soulful prayers to you eternally. Kindly remain here with us to bless always in our spiritual sadhanas". With a ready sweet smile, He sealed it with instant approval. Hence Lord Mahavishnu is abiding in his ethereal form blessing the asthikas in several ways. For a few more centuries this land thus consecrated by the Highest God was not inhabited, but people in their laes preferred it for settlement after the installation of Bharata's image in the temple. It has a fascinating legend.

The story goes that once this area was ruled by a pious minded feudatory chief called Vakkey Kaimal. He was a devout adorer of Sri Mahavishnu, and led an austure life of adorable kind. One day, he had a strange dream - he was awakened by a mysterious person and hastened him to go to sea shore to find a rare treasure. On reaching the shore nearby, to his surprise, he found four idols of Sri Mahavishnu lying resplendent, consecrated by the bright rays of the rising sun. They were that of Srirama, Bharata, Lakshmana and Satruguna. Their size, sculpture, design set his heart dancing in an inexplicable joy of a sublime kind. Considering it as the rarest privelege let all by the benignity of the all merciful Bhagawan, he installed them according to sastric injunctions, building modest shrines, one for each at four places for Srirama at Triprayar, Bharata at Irinjilakuda; Lakshmana at Mooatikulam and Satrughna at Payammal. Another feature of speciality observable in the four is, they are the images of Lord Mahavishnu bearing striking resemblances with one another - all adorned with four hands, holding mighty conch, disc, mace and rosary. And are of same design and size. But they are conceived differently and given different names. The image of Bharat displays in its face a distinct and rare kind of anxiety and devout longing for the darsan of his

brother, expected to arrive in any moment. Belief gained currency that worshipping of the four deities at all the four places, on the same day confers special merits; and it is possible; for, all of them lie at short distances from one another, and moreover command coveyance facilities.

THE LEGEND OF KUTALAMANIKYAM

And this Lord Bharata is popularly known as Kutalamanikyam. It has an interesting story embedded in folk - lore literature, and is held in high esteem. As the belief goes, once on a particular day, the forehead of the image emitted lusturous light. Its blazing brightness attracted all the adorers assembled then for worship. The excited asthikas began guessing about the origin of that extraordinary luminosity. They could not. Are God's ways to simple comprehend? Do they admit easy interpretations? How else could God makes himself acceptable and adorable, if not through such miracles? One among the congregated bhaktas volunteered to get the brightest Manikyam in possession of the Raja of Kayamkulam for comparison and identification of the source. He succeeded to get that much valued Manikyam and took it near the image. And lo! as a soon as the Raja's Manikyam was brought near this image, strangely enough it merged into the forehead of the Moolavirat. Efforts to remove it failed, but it heightened their devotion and cemented faith in the Lord. As the lusturous brightness of the deity increased due to the merging of the Raja's Manikyam, the deity came to be known as Kuttalamanikyam - combination of Manikyams, or Manikayms, joined together.

THE LEGENDS OF SANGAMESWAR

Yet there is one more additional name of this august deity. This Lord is also called Sangameswara - the Lord of Sangama, or Lord abiding in a place where two rivers merge with each other. In the ancient days, this present Irinjilakuda was located at the

confluence or Sangam two rivers - Chalakkudin and Kurumalai. So he is called Sangameswara, considering him to be the cause of that Sangama. As the rivers since changed their course, the name too is faded, rather forgotten. Yet the temple authorities are conducting the arratu annual festival of the temple on the banks of Chalakkudi one year, and Kurumalai river in the next year. This not only establishes the truth of the confluence of the rivers at this place, but glorifies the Lord's sovereignty over the two.

THE LEGEND GARNERING POWERS OD DEITIES

One more exciting version explains the name of Sangameswara in a strange way, and in a different setting at it. It only raises the divinity of the Lord to the pinnacle of glory. It runs - Once a pious bhakta of saintly character belonging by Taliparamba betook himself a strange mission of visiting all the sacred places in Kerala to garner the powers - Chaitanya of the presiding deities and transferring that whole Chaitanya to the temple deity of his village for the benefit of asthika community. What an idea! How noble was the mission!! How exemplary was his humanism!!! If at all such ideal materialises, one can worship all the deities in one place, and see all the forms in one and same deity only. No sooner did the idea take its final form than he set out to collect the Chaitanya of each deity in his sacred conch shell. With such strange method and mission, he travelled across the country visiting every holy place and collecting the powers of the deities in his conch shell. He visited this shrine too. Alas! his ambition was misfired; mission went up in smoke; for, the conch shell embodying the divinities of several deities slipped from his hand here and broke into many pieces. Instantly the collected powers merged into the presiding deity of this temple. So the archamurthi of this temple is uniting in himself all those powers. Though the saint went back empty - handed and broken- hearted, it did incalculable services to the worshipper of this deity. As the divinities of gods merged in the image of Bharata, he is called the Sangameswara.

Would not the temple thus emerged indisputably become the holiest, viewed from any angle? Even if it is seen with coloured glasses, they do give a colourful picture, and thereby heighten the multi-coloured glory of that multi-dimensional personality. A visit convinces and cleanses one from all the impurities sticking on to mind, body and soul.

TEMPLE

This temple is a typical example of Kerala ambalam. Its architectural style, from top to bottom springs many surprises to the non-keralites. Though it has all the essential parts, like gopuram, prakara, girbhagriha, vimana, Kalasa, pradakshana path, vedika for Mulavirat etc; they are unlike their counter parts in places of worship found elsewhere in India. That is its speciality, and there lies its glory. This temple faces the East and has a massive Mahadwara. It is quite impressive with a large number of carvings. The Srikoil-girbhagriha is circular in shape and has a copper plated roof, adorned with a golden tazhikakudam atop, corresponding to the Kalasa. The outer walls beautified with granite friezes and wood carvings of excellent craftsmanship feasts the eye and delights the heart. The beautiful murals on either side of the walls detain the beholders for long and lift the souls. The holy Kulpini thirtham lies in the northern side and its masonry work is impressive.

LORD BHARATHA

The archamurthi is quite dignified and majestic in size and shape. Like the Vishnu image, it has four arms holding mighty weapons like the disc and conch, gada and japamala. Its splendour casts an irresistible attraction on the viewers who involuntarily close eyes and join palms as a mark of veneration at its first sight. Bereft of any other Upadevathas, its singularity sets it apart from the rest of the temples of Kerala. May be, that Bharata has no equals either in higher or lower echelons.

The age old traditions of the temple restricted the number of pujas to three, against five offered in very Kerala temple. Morning Puja called Ethirthu Puja, noon Puja - Uchcha puja and Athzha Puja - night puja are conducted regularly.

BRINJAL NAIVEDYAM TO BHARATA

The offering of Brinjal Naivedyam is a distinctive feature of this temple. And it has an interesting background. Once a devout aged bhakta suffered from stomach-ache for years. Expert doctors in the best hospitals too left him in lurch, saying incurable. Advised by an ardent devotee, he reached this temple and participated in Bhajans, observing austerities. He worshipped the Lord soulfully for some days. Will this Lord also let him down? Certainly not! He appeared before him in a dream and advised him to prepare Brinjal Naivedyam with 101 brinjals and offer it to him. He did. And lo! his acute and much-agonising pain disappeared like himabindu at the touch of the first ray of Balabhaskara. Since then it is highly preferred for curing the ailments, and moreover regarded as a special item of offering to the deity.

Tiruvonam falling in the month of August-September lasting for 11 days is an important annual festival, when the newly harvested rice is cooked and offered to the Lord. Mukkidi-a special prasada - a sure cure for several ailments is distributed then. Thousands participate and receive it. Medom, another festival celebrated in April-May offers a pageant-colour, sound and light, and delights one and all. The elephant procession being the star attraction has a great pull then. Thousands participate in it gaily every year.

Visiting of this unique of uniques will remain unique in life. Visit and avail profit!

SRIRAMA'S TEMPLE - TRIPRAYAR

PREFACE

This celestial celebrity born as an illustrious son to that distinguished Dasaratha left behind a priceless legacy in the form of virtue, which the grateful humanity enshrining its image in stupendous shrines is adoring, since his niryaṇa. Each country is vying with the other in rejoicing at perpetuating the memory of that worshipful Srirama in numerous kinds of edifices, and Kerala the sacred land of that redoubtable Prasuram stands in the forefront claiming honour for adoring that Souseelyamurthi in several forms and numberless kovils based on strange legends. Among them Tiruvilwamala, Tripayer and Tiruvangad deserve reverent mention and instant visitation for reasons more than one. Their unique glories are drawing the devotees to the holy feet of the Lord in lacks throughout the year. During the annual festivals, they metamorphose themselves into Bhuloka Vaikunta and bless the genuine bhaktas as he did in the case of Ahalaya to single out one. Among the famous triad Tripayar comes next to that of Tiruvilwamala.

ANTIQUITY

The uniqueness of Tripayer Rama Temple arises from the very august balikal along with the archamurthi found and enshrined by Vakkaimal - a local chieftain of inimitable dedication. According to the legend, the devout Kaimal was informed by certain mysterious persons that there lay washed ashore four sacrosanct idols of Sri Mahavishnu and he must undertake the responsibility of installing them at four holy places, befitting their stature, lusture, gesture etc.,

with Vedic injunctions. It was in a dream. Waking up atonce, he went to seashore with his men and found to his inexplicable delight four beautifully sculptured replicas of Sri Mahavishnu adorned with four hands, but with different facial expressions. Being a devotee of rare type he made immediate consultations with the pandits of agamas and installed one at Irijilakuda in a temple built naming the deity as Bharata, benefiting the facial expression peculiar to that statue. Then his search for other suitable places ended with selection of Tripayar for Srirama, Moozhikulam for Lakshmana and Payemmal for Satrugna. His cup of joy spilled at those four places and they later became famous temples of eternal religious importance.

The installation of Rama's image at Tripayar has an awe-some background and it heightens the glory of the Lord to unprecedented level, and endowed the idol and temple with heavenly sanctity. During his consultation with the learned agama pandits for the installation of Rama's statue, a mystery surfaced all on a sudden-an audible but invisible voice directed Kaimal and the men in the assembly deliberating over the place, that they had to install it at the exact spot below a peacock seen flying just at the auspicious moment fixed. Considering the injunction as heaven-sent, preparations for pratishta went on war-footing, and they all assembled on the Subhaghatika looking up for the peacock to appear. But it did not appear. As the sands were running out, the anxiety of the people went up skyward, but the sky with its changing patterns, perhaps, did not offer any sure clue. Just then there appeared a devotee holding a bunch of peacock feathers in his hands. The concerned persons hastened to complete the pratishta ritual at the moment fixed. They completed. Fortunately at the propitious time, a few minutes later according to right calculations, the bird did appear just right above the present balikal. The pundits installed the balikal there with due ceremonies and prayers. Hence the balikal is worshipped with equal fervour by the visiting public. This oddity surprised the devotees then. The Balikal fixed thus started revolving round of its own accord.

Attributing it to divine power, people worshipped it with awe and admiration till Naranthu Bhranthan's visit to the temple. Being a Siddha of great mystic powers, surprised at this rare phenomenon, he found out from the yogic powers the reason for such rotation. If allowed, he inferred it would undo the glory and mar further growth. So, he stopped it forthwith. In order to prevent the decline in the power of the idol due to this, he installed two goddesses - Sridevi and Bhudevi on each side of the presiding deity. Naturally, the influx of visitors grew as fame spread far and wide due to addition of two goddessess on either side of the mulavirat.

THE CLOSING OF WESTERN GATE

There is one were version recounting the installation of Sridevi and Bhudevi in the Srikoil and it is attributed to Bilwamangalathu Swamiyar. During his worship on his visit to the temple, he found to his ecstatic joy, Sridevi and Bhudevi entering through the western door and worshipping the archamurthi. To set right the fault in location of installation, he made arrangements for the installation of the Goddessess on either side and also closing of western gate with a view to making the goddessess remain confined to the Srikoil alone. Hence the closure of western gate then, and they are not flung open since then.

THE TEMPLE

This famous temple, thus come into existence is one of the most attractive temples of Kerala. Its architectural marvels and mystical powers have succeeded in attracting devotees through out the year. The Srikoil is circular in shape and with its indispensable conical roof adorning with stupi, it casts great charm on the visitors. In the mandapa called Namaskara mandapa, the artistry of sculptors strikes the eye and drives home several morals through the episodes effeciently sculptured. It has 24 panels. The mural paintings too are a class in themselves. The sculptured figures with their grace and

excellences serve a feast to the art-critics. Leaving the garbha griha, after prayers, the devotees go straight to the Sasta shrine lying in the southern side of the courtyard. There is a belief current here that this temple was dedicated to Ayyappa prior to the consecration of Srirama's idol. As his seat was given to Srirama, he moved to the present southern place, just as Edathedathu Kavu Bhagawati moved to the Northern side at Guruvayur temple after the advent of Balakrishna.

THE MULA VIRAT

Srirama, the presiding deity of the shrine, is a replica of the Chaturbhuja Mahavishnu, holding Sankha and Chakra in his two left hands and Kodanda and rosary in the other hands. The garbhagriha has certain oddities that set it apart from the rest of shrines for Srirama. There is an image of Dhakshinamurti facing the South, a common feature in Siva temples alone. Moreover, the oil lamp hung behind is kept burning round the clock, signifying that the Mulavirat is bearing the aspect of Lord Siva also. According to the opinion prevalent, Srirama got the aspect of Lord Siva at the death of Khara in the war. The Mala which is held in the right hand fortifies another belief that the archamurthi represents the aspect of Brahma. From the symbols it can be deduced that the deity is possessing all the aspects of Trimurthi - Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. This uniqueness indeed has become instrumental in drawing Saiva and Vaishnava bhaktas in large numbers. There is a mini-shrine for Ganapathi opposite the garbhagriha. As the image is just opposite the Mulavirat like the mount of the Lord, devotees while praying remember Hanuman, though there is no visible idol for him. The offering of Kadins is very common here, and it commemorates the return of Hanuman after finding out Mother Sita in Asoka Vana in Lanka. As the image of the mulavirat was installed some centuries back, it is worn off considerably, so panchaloha Kavacha is made and it adorns the Lord now. The image adorned with Sri Vasta mark on the chest, beautified by several dazzling necklaces around the

neck along with colourful garlands look extremely enchanting, and its smiling sublime countenance mesmerises the devotees. If once a visit is made to avail that enchanting darsan, its rapturous thrill exercises such grip, that it never reaches the point of satiety. That is the glory of Srirama - the Trimurthyatmakaswarupa, a rarity not found anywhere.

This Lord has a particular fastination for the Kootu Vazhivadu - offering of pantomime. In the bygone past, Prabandha Koottu was a regular common offering, and every visitor deeming it a proud privilege was offering it to the deity. The deity seeing it unseen enjoyed to his heart's content.

THE DIETY'S PREFERENCE FOR KOOTU

Here is an anecdote that fortifies this belief. In accordance with the rules of the Koottu, there must be atleast one brahmin spectator during the enactment. It happened that no single brahmin attended the performance once. The performer was at his wits end, and was cursing himself at his predicament. There came then a resonant voice, "Go ahead, Koottu is performed for me, not for brahmins. Perform it in my presence. Stop not". The divine command was implemented anon. The actor was elated and the invisible spectator was delighted beyond measure. Since then, the Koottu is offered in the mandapa itself instead of a separate one specially created for this purpose. And moreover, the garbhagriha is kept open throughout the performance.

FESTIVALS

Among the annual festivals conducted, Koottu offering falling in the month of Vrischikam corresponding to mid November is a grand affair and is celebrated by the temple with great eclat. It lasts for 12 days and many thrilling episodes from the Ramayana, like Anguliangam - Hanuman's meritorious role in reaching Lanka,

seeing Sita and bringing her Chudamani for Srirama being the theme, it attracts all classes of spectators, and is staged every year with additions of new faces and spicy dialogues. The regular festivals like Ekadasi in Vrischikam falling in November-December and Pooram in Meenam in March-April common to Rama temples are celebrated with great pomp and splendour. The uniqueness of the festivals is the taking out of Ayyappa's image in procession of the Dasami day, and this testifies to the fact that this was an Ayyappan temple primarily in the beginning. On Ekadasi day Srirama's image is taken round in procession with nearly 21 elephants participating. Its pageantry breaking through several ritualistic offerings is worth-seeing and a quite a gala affair. Next comes the seven day pooram festival in importance, and is celebrated in Meena masam - beginning on the Makaram asterism and ending on the Pooram asterism. It is a part of the famous Arattupuza Pooram festival in which as many as one hundred elephants used to participate in the past. It used to be a grand gala affair in the bygone past, but the changed trends changed its pomp and show. Yet rituals are being observed on a modest scale now. During the seven days, every day the procession starting from temple goes to arattu tank for ceremonial bath. It is a grand opportunity to the devotees to offer prayers there. During the days of Zamorins, it enjoyed spectacular glory and commanded unprecedented honour among the temples dedicated to Srirama. Later, foreign impact changed its fortunes- it came under the Dutch rule from 1719, and after the Mysore Sultans extended their away over it. When the Sultan was defeated by the British, it came under the British raj. The Rajas of Cochin being close to the British, they succeeded in getting it from them. After the reorganisation of States, it is placed under the Administrative control of Cochin Devaswom Board.

It is one of the holy temples and a visit lifts and cleanses one of all the gross and dross. Visit and be benefited!



SRI VADAKKUNATHAN OF TRICHUR

UNIQUENESS

Kerala, the land of swaying palms and lazy lagoons; lush green verdure and fabled Kathakali is the gift of that redoubtable Parasurama, the sixth incarnation of Lord Srimannarayana. This celebrated son of that illustrious Jamadagni, one of the brightest luminaries, adorning the Saptarishi Mandala embodies several unique traits that set him apart from the rest of incarnations of the Lord Protector of the worlds. There is a strange combination of intensely formidable extremes in his mental make up and functional modes. He is at once a ferocious man, ready for annihilation of injustice, and a solicitous person for stabilisation of theism. And restoration of tranquility All but for public good and Jagatkalyana. Contradictious did exist in him and set his life in motion. His unexceptional tenacity that manifested in filial piety, retaliatory ferocity and humane religiosity is second to none but to itself. No incarnated person can stand comparsion with him in these aspects. Extremes seem to be ever at war in him and so, whatever emerged turned out spectacular and exemplary for mankind. Look! When father bade him sever the head of his mother, down went his most potent weapon - Parasu and off flew the head. Father is God on earth, and God does no wrong. Result! that implicit faith gave life to mother, and made him the lone example of dutiful son. When the question of taking revenge on power mad ruler, he excelled Rudra and felt satisfied only when the whole Kshatric power was stamped under his feet; retriued a great mass of land from the Seagod by hurling his potent axe into him for causing harm to the ascetics, and finally toured from end to end propitiating the divinities and installing them in appropriate places along with appointing priests,

codifying rituals, framing injunctions for due conduct of prayer services and running temple administrations. There is no shrine without visited by him, nor bearing the stamp of his powerful brain or fully evolved soul. What Kerala is today is what he left behind in every realm of human action. Its highest literacy and greatest enterprising supremacy etc., are but the outcome of his domineering personality, peerless magnanimity and inimitable spirituality.

A deep study of this august person will be rejuvenating, elevating and rewarding to every one, regardless of a wide variety of limitations. He is the creator and sustainer of Kerala. No where his fervour for religious awakening surfaced as it did at Tiru- Siva-Perur, the shortened soulless Anglicised form of Trichur. It is here his ardour for spiritual glorification of the land reached the zenith and made him a polestar among the nation- builders. It is on account of his deep mediation, there emerged the image of Mahavishnu, Sivalinga, and Sankaranarayana - a combined form of Siva and Vishnu. Though almost all temples of Kerala are bearing the imprints of his zeal for religious regeneration, this temple besides enshrining those images is retaining many vestiges in the form of Vedikas and rituals. Without modification. It is his gift and the best one at it. Among the uniques that the temple boasts, the archamurthis in all four main srikoils deserve first mention. The images Sankaranarayana, Vishnu, Siva and Parvathi now worshipped were materialised by his deep meditation and ardent veneration. It is in this temple precincts, Parasurama dwelt for sometime; it is here the presiding deity - Lord Vadakkunathan reveals himself in a three-metre-high-ghee mound; it is this temple that stands a classic example of Kerala style of architecture, renowned for many specialities; it is this temple's grand Koothambalam that displays exquisite pannel walls and mural paintings which alone worth an indispensable visit; it is this kshetram that thrills the visitors first with its incredible space and light surrounding garbhagrihas; it is this shrine that sprouted in the midst of Tekkinikadu in the beginning, and now but an oasis of peace; it is this temple's Pooram annual festival deemed the greatest

pageantry matchless in spectacle of colour, glamour, sound and all-round grandeur; it is this city that enjoyed the reputation of the seat of administration of the rulers of Cochin; it is this recorded in the legends as the famous Vrishbhachala - the Kshetra of Nandikeswara, and it is this temple declared as a national monument by the Union Government.

Glorified by celestial connections; found by the incarnated divinity, hailed for several uniques; worshipped by millions of Saiva and Vaishnava and Sakteyas with equal fervour; patronised by the royal houses; eulogied by the connoisseurs of art; visited by godmen, this Vadakkunatha kshetram is heightening the glory of Kerala, rather India, since the Tretayuga.

ANTIQUITY

The origin of this glorious mokshapuri takes us to the Tretayuga, when that indomitable Parasurama entered the arena of spirituality after wiping out kshatria race and started visiting place after place of this sacred land, wrested from the Sea-god for subjecting the peaceful munikulam to untold misery by his atrocious action of submerging parnasalas etc. Wherever his sacred feet touched the soil, there came up some shrine or the other for public benefit. And he imparted glory to the shrines by suffusing them with divinity, either through installation of images, or prescribing rituals on codifying the existing ones, or framing new ones. No sooner did he step on this Nandikeswara kshetra, there developed in his mind an irresistible ambition to install a powerful Sivalinga for the benefit of asthika community. The Tekkinikadu with its thick foliage and surrounding green verdure lifted his soul and intensified his longing for immediate installation. So he sat in meditation and propitiated Lord Siva for materialising his pious wish. He ardently prayed for Lord Siva's manifestation alone here. When he opened his eyes, to his pleasant surprise, he found the beautiful image of Lord Mahavishnu with four arms, holding Sankha, Chakra, Gada and

Tamara. As his aspiration went awry, he again began meditation, but this time on opening the eyes he found two images, one was that of Rama and the other Siva. Although highly pleased at the sight of the two, when prayed for one only he decided to give his ambition another chance, so resumed meditation; but this time, to his great shock and surprise found the image of Sankaranarayana, flanked by Rama on one side and Siva on the other. Though perplexed, he reflected on the outcome for a while, when he realised to his infinite joy that Lord Siva did so deliberately to drive home the truth, that there exists no difference between Siva and Vishnu; both are same and each is as powerful and important as the other. Perhaps to impress upon this universal reality, Lord Siva blessed him with the image of Sankaranarayana at the end. Gratified infinitely, he started the installation work with due rituals. May be to give absolute contentment to all classes of devotees, he installed MOTHER Parvathi's icon in a separate shrine behind that of Lord Siva, his own inseparable spouse. And with this addition, this predominant Siva kshetra embodies Saktipita, making it a full circle. This is Parasurama's ingenuity! And that speaks of his boundless concern of humanity. A standing proof of his catholicity!

He remained here for long meditating and attending to constructional work together with appointing of personnel to prayer services and several departments of temple administration besides codifying and framing of tenets for conduct of pujas. The sacred spot sanctified by his dwelling now goes by the name of 'Thara'. Ardent worshippers adore this place on the same model of a temple. Isn't he an incarnation of Lord Mahavishnu? Hasn't he embarked upon spiritual regeneration after subjugation of evil in the world? By his Olympian strength and Herculean efforts he converted a tranquil primeval forest area into a hustle bustle land teeming with thousands of famous brains and busy hands. And what is more he strode like a Colossus from corner to corner spilling grace, peace and ease at every step. Kerala minus his ethereal presence is unimaginable, nor derecognition of his role is relishable. If done it becomes a

monumental proof of gross indifference to the eternal values. Kerala's rich culture and gorgeous Nature emanated from him. What Agasthya is for Tamil Nadu, Parasurama is for Kerala. Their contribution can neither be estimated by human brains, nor computer data.

THE TEMPLE

This supremely unique, chronologically ancient, spiritually important Vadakunnathan holy shrine lies atop a hillock called Vrishabhachala, occupying about nine acres of land. Its massive stone wall serving as strong fortification is adorned with four tall towers, and contains in its spacious sprawling ground a cluster of shrines and scores of aswartha vrikhas. As one enters, crossing the western portal, a vast courtyard encircling the graciously built imposing shrines fills the eyes. A remarkable graceful theatre hall beautified by sloping metal plated roof called Kuttambalam beackons his attention and detains him with its imposing dimensions and colourful mural paintings. It is the biggest of its kind, the Kerala temples boast of, and is deemed the neucleus of Chakiyarkuttu - a highly developed and greatly praised form of dramatic art. This play-house, where several performance of all types of dance dramas like Kathakali, Mohini Attam are being stayed over years, is fittingly decorated with wooden panels and architectural marvels. This majestic structure has an exciting glory imbued with divinity.

THE KUTTAMBALAM AND ITS ORIGIN

It goes that one Sankunni Varrier holding the office of Diwan, desiring to renovate the dilapidated ancient building, appointed Vellanazhi Nambudri, known for his mastery over Vastu Sastra. Besides being a master builder, he was an adorer of supreme type. He adopted a novel method of building-going to the old one and

lying on his upper cloth for an hour, lost in meditation of God. Coming out, he used to order the workers to destroy the old and build new one according to his direction. "Without proper sketch, how to proceed?" Used to be the question by the workers. He invariably answered, "It was done already". By whom? None could question him. Yet the bewildered carried out his behests, without further interrogation. And the final result was the emergence of one hall which has neither equals nor sanctity anywhere in Kerala. Extremely satisfied with his extra-ordinary skill, the Divan desiring to test his skills asked him to tell the number of bricks needed for the outer wall, on condition that incorrect estimation would land him in trouble. Would the divinely inspired master sculptor err? Never! Giving the exact number, he went ahead with construction. Strangely enough two bricks were found wanting. The divine architect boldly replied when questioned that the error had crept in due to either wrong counting by the workers or some foul game wantonly played by someone. The Diwan confessed that it was under his direction that two bricks were concealed. Wonder-struck Diwan suitably rewarded him. Such is the awe-some background of this Kuttambalam, now elevating the visitors with its exterior, architectural adornments, interior decoration and ulterior divinity.

Adjacent to this there are idols of Kali and Gopalakrishna, and the visitor invariably sees several cows grazing here, around perhaps justifying the statue of Gopalakrishna. The image of Risabha, Lord Siva's mount is enshrined in a niche, a little away to this. There lies 'Thara' - a raised platform lying to the north-east, where Parasurama dwelt for sometime. Though builder of many shrines, there are not many temples for him, barring one near Trivandrum, hence the extension of soulful prayers to this object. Next comes Nalambalam which has a small opening on the wall. Visitors see the dazzling brass Kalasas of the main temples through this without fail, since seeing them through this opening amounts to seeing all the temples in India, according to temple traditions. In the south west corner, there is small but strangely shaped apsidal shrine

housing the image of Dharma Shastri. Its uniqueness draws the devotees for darsan and prayer.

THE SHRINE SANKHA AND CHAKRA

The last worth-seeing object of veneration is a small rectangular roofless shrine containing Sankha and Chakra, built in memory of Adi Sankara.

They come into existence due to the munificent boons showered by the Presiding deity - Vadakkunathan on the deserving adorers. Incidentally it helps in tracing the period of construction of this great shrine. The temple existed even before that great Adwaitamata Pitadhipathi Sri Sankaracharya was born. And it is this Lord that was born as son to Aryamba who later blossomed into an illustrious Snakaracharya who did yeoman service to Hinduism, when Jainism and Buddhism posed great threats for the extinction of that all adorable Hinduism.

According to legend, the parents of AdiSankara visited this famous temple and offered prayers, observing austerities like fasting for 41 days for the birth of a son. The All-Compassionate Lord choosing to be born as their son to reinstate the falling Hindu citadel, granted it at once. And accomplished his ambition by establishing four Mutts in four premier centres of India. It is believed that he came here and rejoined the deity-attained Sayujyam, though there is another version that attributes his final disappearance at Kedarnath temple lying in the snow capped Himalayas.

THE ARCHAMURTHIS

Now begins the darsan of the principal deities. Surprise greets the devotee first on entering the Vadakkunathan Srikovil. The Mahalinga obtained by Parasurama is installed here facing west, but

due to offering of constant abhisheka with cow's ghee, it is formed into a tall 10-foot-mound. Though it is surrounded by burning oil lamps round the clock and for centuries, the mound neither melted off, nor lost its shape. Is it not Sivamahima? Yes, the Vadakkunathan's eternal miracle! The temple's unique blessing too. Moreover, one sees neither an insect, nor his nose is assailed by bad odour. This centuries old ghee is in great demand for making herbal preparations to cure diseases. The ghee abhisheka being the Lord's favourite, devotees offer it with due prayers. Behind this is situated the MOTHER Parvathi's shrine. The icon is made of wood and faces east. Its beauty draped in glittering jewellery and colourful garlands enthralls the devotees. The two-storeyed temple for Srirama is located to the south end of the Srikoil. It is facing west, like that of the Lord Siva's shrine. The icon of Srirama is quite majestic with four hands adorned with Sudarsana Chakra, Sankha, Koumodaka and the fully blossomed Tamara. Abhisheka with oil alone is offered, unlike ghee in the Vadakkanthan shrine. The idol laden with colourful garlands and shining gold ornaments appears extremely radiant, lit by the flickering oil lamps around. In between these two srikoils lies the circular two-storeyed srikoil dedicated to Sri Sankaranarayana facing the West. Mural paintings adorning the walls is a novelty of this srikoil. They are quite enchanting and narrate many episodes from the Mahabharata. Panchagavya abhishekam is offered to this deity. These three shrines have spacious Mukhamandapams. As the very air is surcharged with the presence of divinities and chants of the priests, it transports every visitor to celestial world for a time. Before leaving these principal srikoils, the devotees fail not visiting the Ganapathi shrine lying between Vadakkunathan and Sankaranarayana srikoils. The charming image besides filling the eyes with its diminutive beauty, fills the bellies with sweet appams as prasadam to the visitors. The Kshetra Palaka of this temple called Vettukkorumakan is installed in a niche in the northern nalambalam. Some Upadevathas are found fixed along the 7-foot wide Pradarkshanamarga - the circumambulatory path.

THE MYSTERIOUS RISHABHA

There lies a beautiful huge image of Rishabha at the main entrance to the Nalambalam. It is also an object of worship, since it is the Vahana of Lord Siva. Normally the image of the mount of the principal deity is installed straight opposite the Mulavirat. The tradition is common and universal, but here it is not so. Here the Lord's vahana is at the main entrance for a background fantastic, and purpose well intentioned. In the dim past, a youthful ascetic visited the temple. He was a great Sivabhakta. Contented with surroundings exuding divinity, he decided to stay here meditating on Vedakkunathan. He did with a difference. He used to sit in front of the shrine in the mornings and disappear with the closing of temple doors, and reappear just at their opening the next day. His masculine vigour, youthful charm and saintly attitude drew the attention of the visiting bhaktas. The young women taking fancy for him cast amorous looks on him, more often than not. Slyly and openly they feasted their eyes with his unusual charms. Result! When children were born to those who looked at him long for days, they resembled the young saint. Men suspected and decided to get rid of him. Somehow! The news came to him. Soon he engaged some skilled artisans and made a huge image of an enchanting majestic bull and installed it at the entrance. Now it is the turn for the cows to be fascinated by the extraordinary beauty of the bull, and riveted their broad eyes on it, forgetting grazing even. This went on for some time. Later, the newly born calves, bore striking resemblances to the stone bull lying at the temple. People realised their folly. Sure, whatever the object the pregnant women fancy for, or concentrate their attention on during their pregnancy, the offsprings partake its qualities and shape. It is the same bull the visitors see and worship before offering prayers to the principal deities.

THE LEGEND OF SRIMOOLASTHANAM

Another object of worship deserving devotional attention is the Srimoolasthanam - paved platform under a peepal tree near the western tower. It has an awe-inspiring story and establishes Parasurama's inexhaustible and inimitable passion for spiritual progress of the state, and particularly the shrines he built, or images installed by him. In this respect he is alone of the avatarapurushas surpassing any, at any time and in any place as a matter of fact.

According to the belief prevalent, it is at this sacred spot under the most sacred of trees, Aswatha Vriksha, he presided over the group of Nambadri Brahmins - the traditional priests and gave final directions for the performance of daily and occasional pujas, and instruction for running of the temple administration before his final disappearance. During the course of instructions, he assured that he would come to their rescue at the time of any crisis that may likely develop due to some error or the other. He acquainted them with the procedure to invoke his help like observing fast, chanting certain hymns etc. The priests were thoroughly pleased with his humanitarian zeal and adored him with respect due, for they knew that he was the personification of Sri Mahavishnu.

Fortunately the vehicles of temple administration moved, as it were, smoothly on the metal road for centuries. Nothing untoward either marred the routine work, nor barred the planned activities. Among the Nambudris, some sceptics wanted to put his word to test, and decided to know, how and wherefrom would he come to lift them during troubles. Soon they set the wheel in motion - observed fast and chanted the hymns as directed. To their surprise, there appeared before their own eyes Parasurama with a question mark face. His enquiries met with mumbled and fumbled answers. But an honest old priest bending low confessed the wanton mischief on the part of a young chicks among them. Unable to bear the mischief, and swallow their disbelief in him, using harsh words he disappeared saying that he would never appear, come what may at any time. He

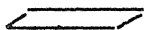
kept up his word. Yet his ethereal presence is traceable in every frame of the temple building, and every syllable of the instructions he left for the progress of theism. He is adored at this place along with the 'Thara', where he dwelt for sometime.

FESTIVALS

Strangely enough this benign Lord shuns publicity and resents going out in procession out of the temple complex. So no Utsavams or festivals, except Maha Sivaratri. Even on this holiest day he does not stir out of his seat. Utsavamurthis are not taken out. ON the spectacular celebration of Pooram day too, he merely watches everything going on as passive spectator than an active participant. he does not allow even a single pisa spent on any item of expenditure incurred then. Everything goes on as usual, and nothing special even in puja is allowed to creep into the temple premise. What a frugality! How much simplicity!! Sure, this is in conformity with the unostentitious life preferred by that Kailasadhipathi, the personification of sublime humility.

HISTORICITY

History cannot grasp anything that occurred during the days of Parasurama. The temple was administered by the Brahmin families brought by Parasurama himself from a country on the banks of holy Krishna. The priests were called then yagathiris. Everything went well, but when the royal families entered the campus as rulers, things underwent many changes. The kings of the erstwhile Cochin took over the management and administered for long, rather till the temples came under the administration of State Governments. It is now under the control of Cochin Devasom Board of the many Siva temples, it is unique in respects. And each one beckons instant visit emancipation.



GURUPAVANAPURA

UNIQUENESS

Guruvayur, a household shrine in Kerala, and a sublime haven for Narayanopasana is a popular Punya Kshetra of global significance. No pilgrimage centre, be it Saiva, or Vaishnava, or Sakteya can be placed on par with this divyadhama, nor the claimant for priority ever wins, with regard to the ministration of a great variety of spiritual services covering every segment of human life. The wide range of multitudenous religious ceremonies conducted in the august presence of Sri Krishna for blissful life by warding off evils confronting, or that may likely emerge in the course of every venture, together with offering of grateful thanks, on successful fulfilment of desires, lure devout humans in millions to this mokshapuri throughout the year. No wonder the strangers are awestruck at the offering of an infinite number of rituals - nithya and naimithika, encompassing every phase of the entire span of devotees' existence, beginning with namakarna - christening; annaprasana - first rice feeding; askharabhayasa - initiating into studies; Vyapararambha - inaugurating avocation; vivaha Subhakarya - solemnising marriage; shastyabdi purti - celebrating sixtieth birth day etc., in addition to several rituals connected with giving tulabharam, donation of articles, making endowments and the like, when relieved from life-taking ailments, or on crossing unfordable obstacles in the ocean of life. Here is a shrine with a difference! And there lies its uniqueness!! That accounts for its popularity !!!

Moreover, Lord Krishna, the presiding deity of this aced shrine always flashes across the minds of the ardent devotees, whenever they think of celebrating of any subhakraya, and hastens them to His lotus feet for trouble-free progress and quick accomplishment of their speculation. As the omnicompassionate

Lord never lets down any pious man, the glory of the temple is growing horizontally and vertically with the passage of time, despite the test-tube scientists, subjecting the miracles of the Lord to microscopic investigation. And Lo! to their shock, perhaps, the luminaries of other religions too, like Christianity and Islam embraced, and are embracing this creed with implicit faith, not out of external compulsion, but from the depth of inner conscience, overflowing with infinite bliss on realisation of its mightiest might. History, more than legends are replete with scores of instances of honest confessions made by the mighty personages of other religions.

THE SCANTITY OF THE PLACE

For, it was the favourite abode of the divine adarsa dampathis - Uma and Maheswar even before the installation of the idol of Balakrishna in the Srikoil; it is this kshetra that fulfilled every clause of the injunction for installation by Lord Krishna himself before his final disappearance from the world; it is this self-same kshetra sanctified by Brihaspati - preceptor of gods, and Vayu - God of wind by their eternal presence after Vighraha Pratishtha; it is here the far-famed Narayana Bhattathiri's magnum opus was composed; it is here, Janamejaya was rid of leprosy; it is here a Pandyan King succeeded to getting immunity from cobra bite; it is for this temple, the Muslim King Tipu Sultan made enormous endowments; it is for this shrine, the British Government accorded Sarvamanyam - exemption from payment of land revenue; it is in this temple ancient traditions in their pristine purity are observed with scrupulous attention to every detail, and it is this temple that has on its roll, as it were, hundreds of celebrated beneficiaries of international reputation in every field of human endeavour. Innumerable are the instances of desperate devotees reaping celestial bliss along with worldly success of spectacular magnitude on becoming devotees,

dwelling all over the world. Millions of miracles that occurred in the lives of devotees transformed this small, yet superb sanctum into a supreme citadel of unfailing faith in divinity.

ANTIQUITY

The charming image of Bala Krishna with captivating countenance, wreathed in infectious sweet smile, with four hands adorned with disc, conch, mace and lotus, in majestic standing posture, installed in Srikoil has an awe-some history dating back to Dwaparayuga - to be precise, just before Krishna's birth. According to the Mahabhagavatha, it is the same idol presented to Brahma by Sri Mahavishnu, who in turn gave it to Kashyapa couple for their inimitable dedication, and who when born again as Devaki and Vasudeva in the Dwaparayuga, came in possession of it by divine blessings. They worshipped it in Mathura through thick and thin of their life, and ultimately consecrated in Dwaraka, when Krishna bade and exodus of the Yadava community for safety. It was worshipped by Krishna himself along with others till his mission on earth came to a close. Just at the time of his final exit before the submerging of Dwaraka into the ocean, he instructed Udhava to entrust the task of installing it to Brihaspati and Vayu in a suitable place for uninterrupted worship.

When informed of the Lord's injunction, Brihaspati and Vayudeva made an elaborate search for a fitting place throughout the length and breadth of akhanda Bharatha Kanda. And at long last, when they were convinced with the sublimity of a spot here, in front a lake of crystal clear water, surrounded by thick green foliage, they found the abode of Uma Maheswar at the end of the lake, who pleased with the selection sealed it with consent when informed of Krishna's wish. Thereupon Brihaspati and Vayu installed the idol here for regular worship with due ceremonies. It prospered beyond expectation in a short period and became a popular kshetra of eternal attraction. The place thus developed into a nagara, went by the name of Guruvayupura of Guru Pavanapura. And Guruvayur for

short. Needless to say it owes its prosperity and sanctity to the selection made by Guru and Vayu.

THE JANAMEJAYA EPISODE

Another legend has a different version, though agrees with the fundamentals of the origin of the Vighraha. It begins - when the celebrated Kuru King Parikshit, the scion of much-famed lunar dynasty died of snake bite, his valorous son Janamejaya performed Sarpayaga to put an end to the whole brood of Nagas. Millions of snakes were burnt, but their whole sale destruction brought him woe - he became a victim of a virulent type of leprosy. All attempts at cure failed. He bewailed. He was advised then to worship the image of Lord Krishna for sure cure. Search was instituted at once for securing the powerful idol of Krishna, submerged in the ocean after the exit of Krishna. When efforts were crowned with success due to the invaluable assistance of Brihaspati and Vayu, the Vighraha has installed at this place, found appropriate for such divine image. Janamejaya was cured of his incurable leprosy by his matchless austerity, and long penance he did here. The Pouranic episode cemented the faith of devotees in the Lord, thenceforth ardent devotees are taking vows before the idol to visit the temple again and again to make offerings in token of the relief from dreadful diseases. As there number is on the increase miraculously, it is testifying to the divinity embedded in the Vighraha.

HISTORICITY

From the beginning, the temple's administration was controlled by 72 Nambudri Illoms, under the suzerainty of the Zamorins of Malabar. Every item of management - Prayer services, construction and development programmes were scrupulously supervised by them over centuries, but disgerssions among them ended in court. Later Malleseri Illom took charge of administration with Zamorin of kozhikode as Managing Trustee. Finally, it was

entrusted to Board of Trustees. And now it is functioning under Governments supervision and achieving commendable progress. The temple owns extensive landed property, sufficient to meet the cost of its maintenance. Apart from this, the income from several Vazhivadus, and hundi collections are quite adequate to meet the maintenance charges of the temple with hundreds of regularly paid personnel looking after several day to day affairs.

THE TEMPLE COMPLEX

The sacred shrine is surrounded by strong high compound walls - Prakaras on all sides with two grand, high towers on the eastern and western sides. Crossing the eastern portal, devotees enter the well decorated Nadappura - Pandal, adorned with a granite slab in the centre, called Balikallu, dedicated to Guru and Vayu, in front of which lies the Dhwaja stambha. It is quite spacious enough to hold thousands of persons congregating at a time for several purposes, like¹ annaprasana, marriages, tulabharam, discourses, entertainments etc. The ceiling of the pandal is attractively decorated with the portraits of several gods, prominent being Narasimha, Krishna in several poses, and the painting of elephant Padmanabhan, that served the Lord for long, in a memorable way. There is Koothambalam - a big hall with dais in the south eastern corner meant for entertainment, and in front of it lies a small shrine dedicated to Ayyappa. In the vast courtyard around there are many rooms for several purposes, like storing, cooking, living etc. The Vathilmadam lying opposite the Srikoil is crowded with people doing mediation. Next to it there is a big mandapam. Then comes the much-venerated sanctorum, enshrining the image of Balakrishna. The lord in standing porture feasts the eyes and lifts the soul. The Kerala type of floral decoration of the Lord with brass lamps hung around lend charm and detain the devotees longer. As the flickers of the brass lamps mingle with the sparkles of sweet smiles of the Lord in such a grandiose manner, the beholders feel wafted to Repalli - the divine stadium wherefrom that nauthgy

Navaneethachor regaled the whole world with his inimitable antics and rollicking pranks. But they are dragged down to this noisy, saucy world by the other devotees waiting for that fleeting inexplicable joy. There is a little shrine behind the Karuvarai dedicated to Lord Vinayaka, and another at the North east for goddess Bhagawati. The temple well lies near the southern Prakara and it is famous for its crystal clear water with a special taste of its own, due to possessing curative powers.

THE PRAYER SERVICES

The dinacharya begins quite early as at 3 a.m. To the melodious notes of Nadaswaram the Lord is awakened; this darsan is deemed very auspicious, and it is only after this abhishek starts, followed by malar naivedya. Then the Srikoil is closed for conducting 'Usha Puja'. After this, Shiveli - procession of miniature gold idol of the Lord begins in the inner prakara with 12 lighted lamps in front. Then commences the Ksheerabhishika, Navakabhisheka, followed by naivedyam that marks the close of morning puja. Ucha - Madhyahnika puja, the most important one commences at 11 a.m. and is over with elaborate rituals by 12.30. The Sandhyapuja begins at 5.30 p.m. with another Shiveli and blowing of conch shells. Deeparadhana follows. Regular rituals begin at 8 p.m. and again the procession for the third time. With burning of Truppuka - incense, the day's routine comes to a close. These elaborate sublime rites observed everyday are in strict accordance with agamas.

SPECIAL POOJAS AND OFFERINGS

The temple is deservedly famous for a wide variety of offerings to the Lord, and each follows a definite mode. And for every Puja there is a fixed fee and is offered against the proper receipt issued by the temple Superintendent's office, located at the

eastern tower. Among several kinds of offerings made in the temple, the following merit mention and they are offered throughout the year.

TULABARAM

Devotees benefitted by the mercy of the Lord offer articles, like rice, fruits, jewels, ghee, milk, water, suger etc., equivalent to their weight. The articles can be brought by them, or they are allowed to pay the cost fixed by the authorities. The articles thus obtained are auctioned later. There is heavy rush for this always, indicating the infinite blessings, the Lord showered on the pious public.

ANNAPRASANA

Devout parents conduct the first feeding ceremony of their children here, believing that there cannot be any starvation or stomach disorders etc to their wards anytime in life; it is conducted near the golden flag staff. One of the priests pours thirtham into the child's mouth, followed by smearing of the sandal paste all over. Then the parent feeds the ward. People from far and near throng the koil to avail this, and it is held everyday in the morning.

CHITTUVILAKKU

The outer prakara of Srikoil is fitted with rows of small brass lamps, numbering over several thousands. Devotees who offer this puja enjoy the privilege of lighting. Either, oil or ghee is used, and the lamps burn for nearly three hours, making the entire courtyard bright and magnificent, pleasing to the Lord and devotees, assembled around the Srikoil. It is a costly puja, yet almost every alternate day one can observe this.

VAAKA CHAARTHU

It is one of the rituals observed everyday with utmost reverence. It is the ceremonial bathing of the Bhagawan's idol before attending to Alankara ritual. It is done by the devout priests with such care and attention that it surpasses mother's care for children. Is not Balakrishna their pet child? Who else could bathe him in the absence of Yasoda ma? Their affectionate attention is great and the Lord's anugraha on them is equally great. There are some fine songs associated with it and they are melodious. Ardent devotees not only delight at hearing but commit them to memory for daily singing.

UDAYASTAMANA PUJA

This is the costliest puja and covers the whole day with 21 different and elaborate rituals, beginning with sunrise and going upto sunset. The fee exceeds ten thousand rupees, and it is very auspicious. This is offered normally by the wealthy, on the day deemed auspicious to them. And there is great demand for it too. The devotees, who offer this are given prasadam and special presents. Advance booking for this made available, but one has to wait for a year or two to get his chance.

ALROOPAMS

Small images of the Lord made in gold or silver are offered during the morning puja. They are offered in token of redemption of angavaikalayam - defect in limbs. These images are sold in the office. It is quite a common and everyday occurrence. Besides these, there are several special kinds of rituals observed, when donations are made to the temple, or gifting of elephants or cows.

FESTIVALS

Many festivals are celebrated with much fanfare every year. As numerous types of pujas are offered to the deity every day, the temple wears festive appearance always. To be true, every day is a special day, and so every second is visit-worthy. Hence the unending influx of pilgrims in all seasons. On festival days, it becomes extremely impossible to step into the courtyard even. Among the festivals celebrated, special mention must be made of Vaisakh and Mandalam. The Mandalam Puja lasts for 41 days, beginning with Karthikai month. During these days, brahmins are fed sumptuously by the rich. Panchagavaya abhisekam is offered every day. And then special thirtham is distributed, which the devotees consider it lucky to get it. So they pay visits on these days and stay for days. In this mandala puja, Ekadasi mahotsavam is celebrated on a grand scale. As it is on the Ekadasi day, Bhagawan Krishna gave Gitopadesam to Arjuna; and so is held very sacred. Processions and illuminations make the entire township appear Bhuloka Swarga, and the Srikoil, Vaikuntam, when all the lights 'Chittu' and deepasthambha, are lighted up. This special Utsavam begins quite earlier than Ekadasi, and for a fortnight, grand processions with richly caparisoned elephants and drummers go on and heighten the charm of the Utsavam.

UTSAVAM

It falls in the month of Masi and lasts for 10 days. Sumptuous feasts, grand processions and colourful illuminations mark these days and the pageantry thrills the viewers and transports them to blissful worlds. It is then the Elephant race is conducted, and the contestant who reaches the flag post first is honoured fittingly. It is a gala day for both town people and outsiders, and they watch the beast mountains running along the streets with infinite delight.

People from far off make advance booking in lodges and it is the right time to visit the temple.

NEW YEAR'S DAY

It falls on the first day of Chithirai. This is the New Year's day for Keralites and the curiosity to set eyes on the Lord on waking up draws people from all parts of Kerala in such large numbers that special police squads are required to regulate the crowds. Some over enthusiastic persons go to the temple in the night itself and stay there till dawn. Does not belief lift mountains with a little finger?

ASTAMI ROHINI

This is an auspicious day for Narayanopaskas; for it was on this day Lord Krishna was born for jagadoddharana; so held sacred. Special pujas are offered to the deity on this day. Illumination in and out of the Srikoil is done on a grand scale. Festivity greets everywhere, when gaiety submerges the normal gravity. There are many more, besides celebration of marriages etc., in the temple very often. Their variety and frequency make the temple town every busy, and so the temple always crowded. No day passes without some sort of special occurrence held in the Sannidhi. As all types of celebrations go on round the clock, moreover throughout the year, there is no wonder that the atmosphere is surcharged with divinity, making irreverence or atheism take to heels at the very sight of the towers itself. History records of Tippu Sultan's shuddering at the thundering voice from the pandal, when he attempted to loot temple property and cause desecration. Each object of veneration here exudes sublimity that diseases are cured and troubles fled, when soulful prayers are offered. The case of Narayana Bhattathiri's cure from rheumatism is another instance. The British Government realising its story accorded many facilities and exempted the payment of revenue to temple land. If narrative is given full scope,

volumes roll from the press, libraries overflow with literature delineating the countless sports of that sweet-smiling, short natured Sri Balakrishna who hypnotises the beholders at a single sight.

Avail it and experience the thrill at once.

THE POORNATHRAYEESA TEMPLE - TRIPUNITHURA

Tripunithra - the sacred meeting place of the three Vedas - Rig, Yajur and Sama lying close to Ernakulam is treasuring up a great spiritual wealth in the form of Krishna temple, built as back as in the Dwaparayuga. The idol installed by Arjuna was brought from Vaikunta and so has great sanctity and popularity.

According to legend, a pious brahmin dashed into the court hall of Sri Krishna once and bewailed the loss of his nine children, who died one after another soon after birth. Everytime his lamentation was loud and too deep for tears. Moreover, he was audacious to blame the ruler - saying that his sensuality and laxity in moral was the chief cause of all the woe befalling his lot. Arjuna, who was present then promised that there would not be any recurrence of such misfortune and he would jump into fire, if the next child were to meet similar fate. The brahmin went home. All the while Krishna smiled, but said nothing.

But the untoward happened - the tenth child died. Arjuna prepared for Agnipravesa. Krishna intervening took him to Vaikuntha in his chariot. Welcoming them, the Lord of the Vaikunta said that in order to see Nara and Narayana both at a time, he created that situation - loss of 10 children. Being pleased, he gave life to the children. While returning, Arjuna brought a beautiful image of Krishna in sitting posture on the Adishesha with its outspread hood resembling umbrella over the head of the Lord. It was installed at Tripunithura, the fittest place for such august icon. And lo! the very same brahmin was made to officiate as the chief-priest, and his progeny is still enjoying the same post.

At the time of installation, the region was over grown with sesame: gathering a few seeds, Arjuna crushed and lighted the lamp with their oil. Since then using of gingeli oil for lamps is continued.

The temple celebrates with great eclat three annual festivals in Chingam, Vrichikam and Kumbham. They draw thousands and the piety overflows as many of the the special prayer services observed then.

THE KOZHIKODE TALI - THE SEAT OF PATTATTANAM

UNIQUENESS

The faculty of creativity manifests itself in myriad forms and multitudinous ways, creating a wide variety of artistes - Kalaradhakas. Dedicating themselves to MOTHER Saraswathi their patron deity they serve the society in multifarious ways, motivated by the ideal of JagatHalyana. Among that infinite variety of artistes, poets occupy a much-coveted place to the envy of the whole community for several reasons. They are Srastas - create like Brahma. Their creations live longer. As they infuse into their works ineffable charm and universal truths they stand as beacon lights for mankind to reap bliss and reach that place where cares shake them not, nor loss destabilise them even for a moment. They are endowed with such flights of imagination and creative faculty that they surpass the creator Brahma in some aspects. Their mental eye creates what Brahma could not, and their Vakdhati too wins where Brahmas fails. Alas! they are not self-luminous, but automobiles - they are push-mobiles, who stand not without a prop, nor live by their Sahitya marichikas. Like woman and money, they thrive but with support, and flourish only with protective patronage. Normally under the shade of royalty and aristocracy they bloom and become immortal by blowing off the gloom enveloping life with their works.

The Kozhikode Tali - the seat of Lord Siva has had the proud privilege of extending such patronage to the intellectual luminaries, who produced master pieces for the world to profit by. The enlightened Zamorins shone as Zamorins of letters than the Zamorins of petty kingdoms enjoying transitory sway over some square miles of land. Their patronage is second to none. The highly cultured Lords left behind a glittering chapter in the annals of

Kerala history which immortality hugging it fondly gave them fresh lease of life from time to time. This activity was carried on in the august presence of Lord Siva, who seeing unseen sealed it with approval. Regular literary banquets - Vidwatsabhas were held giving opportunities to the men of letters to demonstrate the peaks scaled by them in the fields of poetry, theology, drama etc. The Zamorins, like Janakamaharshi of Mithila, the Bhoja of Kalidas days, the Pandyan Kings of Sangam period or Vijayanagara kings of Bhuvanavijayam times presided over the Kavyagoshtis, Avadhnakridas etc, to honouring the learned celebrities by conferring titles and endowing them with properties. Yearly once, for a week this intellectual feast was conducted during Tulam and it went by the dignified name of Revathi pattattanam. And the Tali temple was the scene of action and the veritable rendezvous of all literacy activities. Moreover, the sacred shrine had certain uniques that raised it to the pinnacle of glory. It spotlights certain feuds existed between the Nambudris-temple priests and the ruling princes - Zamorins; it is this temple that accorded equal importance to Krishna along with Lord Siva enshrined in independent Srikoils, it is from these holy shrines meritorious Sanskrit works flowed and enriched the Vedic wisdom, and this temple is famous for performing Ganapathi homam and Namajapam every day.

Famous as the seat of Pattattanam, enshrining Krishna and Siva in independent Srikoils, patronised by Zamorins, and enjoyed the honour of producing of classics, bearing the vestiges of Nambudris heroic acts, this Kozhikode temple is adorning the pages of history and legends over centuries and is drawing steady streams of pilgrims for adoration and salvation.

REVATHI PATTATTANAM

The origin of this celebrated literary Assembly has an exulting and colourful story. It focuses light on the nature of temple administration that existed in the beginning. And this came into being as the act of expiation of sin perpetrated by the Zamorins on

the priests called porlatiris in charge of temple administration. In the beginning Nambudiri priests held unlimited sway over this temple administration, as it was the case with Kerala temples. The entire Kerala mandalam was split up into temple states with village or gramam as the administrative unit. The gramam was administered by Kazhakam-an advisory Board with an officer called Taliatiri. These villages were called Talis. Among such 18 talis, Kozhikode Tali was one and it was very famous at it. The presiding deity of the Tali was the head and every thing was done in his name. The territory enjoying the Lord's administration was called Sanketam. The Talitris were carrying on many philanthropic activities including running of Vedapathasalas. There existed harmony and good relationship between Taliatiris and Porlatiris - the heads of temple state. When Zamorin invaded and occupied Kozhikode in 1200 AD, the Porlatiri was expelled. So there was discontent among the Nambudris, and they were seeking means to retrieve the lost. During then, the Kolatiris of Chirakkal another famous and powerful area were not on good terms with the Zamorins, but very close to portatiri of Kozhikode now expelled.

For Nambudris, this came in handy and helped them to weak vengeance on Zamorin. They managed to smuggle the Kolatiri prince into Zamorin's palace in the guise of a brahmin. The Zamorin's daughter Thampuratti fell in love with the prince and they fled to the worst humiliation of Zamorin. All with the connivance of Nambudris. Zamorin at once seized the Tali temple, though the Nambudris offered stubborn resistance being the doughty warriors. Several hundreds were killed and their corpses were thrown on a mound now goes by the name of Surgam.

A slightly different version narrates that the Nambudris resorted to Pattini-fast into death sitting atop the Surgam. Zamorin being firm, the Nambudris died enmasa. And this happened in the month of Tulamasa and lasted for seven days beginning from Revati - the twenty eight asterism. The management of temple thus passed into the hands of rulers from brahmins. There was gloom

everywhere and despair danced in and out of the temple campus. In the palace too grief thrust its weight on the heart of the devout members. For every mishap or pitfall, the king was blamed and taunted. The astrologers advised the King to dispel the veil of anishta caused by the Brahmahatya by a noble measure that would please the brahmins most. The Zamorins was idecislve. But on the advice of Venerable Kolkunnath Sivangal, the Zamorins instituted the Pattattanam in 1309 AD at the Tali temple. And it was an annual feature held in a separate spacious hall under the aegis of a renowned scholar. During then the learned brahmins bless the Zamorin and his family members on receiving honours, titles etc. This according to astrologers would tantamount to expiation of mss brahmahatya. The tradition continued for long and was deemed the best of such similar ones, the temples and rulers introduced and conducted regularly in those days. This seven-day feast of learning raised the status of Zamorins among the rulers of Kerala. The installation of Porkhal Bhagawati at Tiruvalayanad added another feather and raised their status as enlightened rulers. At Tirunavayi, the Mamamkam celebrated once in every twelve years displayed their imperial pomp and awe-inspiring achievements they had to their credit. With peerless grandeur and matchless splendour in three realms - religion, royalty and letters, as exemplified by the Porkali Bhagavathi at Tiruvalayanad, Mamakam at Tirunavayi and pattattanam at Kozhikode the Zamorins have engraved their glory on the glittering pages of history in golden letters, as it were.

A cursory glance at the working of the Revathi pattatanam is quite interesting, besides illuminating and elevating. The pattatanam begins on Revathi in Thulam falling in Oct-Nov and it is a seven-day literary festival vibrating with discourses, battle or wits, avadhanams, recitations, criticisms etc. Brahmins are sumptuously fed and treated with utmost honour. AT the end, the learned brahmins are fittingly rewarded with purses containing 101 fanams equivalent to 300 measures of paddy sufficient for the maintainance of one person. The receipient of this gets every year the same benefit, and it could be got by proxy even. But to the entitlement of that honour one has

to pass through ordeals. Learned luminaries subject the contestants to the most severest tests and draw out their acquisition from several outlets. It was open to all, and hence many intellectuals from far off places attended and obtained royal honours.

The ceremony was taking place in the spacious agrasala - dining hall. The members who were enrolled previously used to sit in the pazhya Sabha and the successful aspirants in the pudhia sabha. The President of the assembly used to conduct those deemed fit for the honours to the presence of Zamorin sitting in the agrasala to giving awards. After honouring them the Zamorin and his family members circumbulate the Vidwatsabha and receive blessings from the members individually by placing hands on the head of Zamorins. It was an exhilarating experience to the learned and memorable thrill for the Zamorins. The Zamorins were personally supervising every aspect of Puttattanam. It honoured several hundreds and produced hundreds of best tretises which the 'future will not willingly let them die'. It was indeed a dazzling diamond in the crown of Zamorins for, it had many other features that set it apart from the counterparts existed then. It was the first of its kind and shone like the polestar. For four centuries it flourished and spread its fragrance throughout the world.

THE TEMPLE

The Tali has certain uniques that make it a class by itself. Here, in one and the same prakara, there are two separate, independent temples, and each has its own distinct entity is, and flourishing without any kind of least disturbance to the other. The Siva temple is an ancient one and has its own Srikoil, nalambalam, flag - staff etc. It is two-storeyed and quardrangular in shape. Its exterior is adorned with excellent stone sculptures of high craftsmanship. There are three rooms inside the Srikoil, an unusual feature found here. It panels and murals are of exceptional artistry and are depicting many episodes from our legends. The mukhamandapa is equally beautified with beautiful wood carvings.

The archamurthi is about two feet in height, and is Swayambhu-self manifested. Tradition attributes its existence to Parasurama's prayers. Gratified by the sanctity of the place, Bhargavarama propitiated Lord Siva to remain here. Would that Bhaktavasankar ever reject such requests? So he has been remaining since then in the form of linga. Purificatory ceremonies were performed by Yoginarayana. Hence the two fold sanctity. It has lifted legions and witnessed spectacular pattattanam.

The Mukhamandapa contains Nandi and to its south lies the shrine for Ganapathi. Balaganapathi image is installed in another shrine to its north east. It is a powerful deity and prefers performance of homam. The devotees performing Ganapathi Hoham with due rituals are profited immensely. Hence heavy rush for this rituals. In the Nalambalam outside, there are shrines for Narasimha and Dharmasasta, each one. It is a unique feature that Narasimha is adored here only. No shrine - anywhere has one independent shrine built for this incarnation. There is another shrine to the north west containing the family deities of the Zamorins, besides housing the beautiful images of Krishna, Devi, Ganapathi, Sivalinga and a Salyarama.

The Krishna mandir enshrining the beautiful image of Srikrishna lies to the north, east of Lord Siva's Srikoil. It has all the constituent parts, like Srikoil nalambalam, flag-staff etc. And is beautiful with excellent murals and panels. The Mulavirat is Chaturbhuj Mahavishnu revealing in his potent weapons - Sudarsana Chakra, conch, mace and lotus. Its enchanting visage and artistic embellishments send thrills and exhilarate the devotees. Its vatilmatam has a special attraction. Its walls are adorned with paintings, of which Anantasayanam has greater appeal. These inexhaustible charms detain the devotees for hours together. As the two stand side by side in the same campus and are receiving prayers, they are displaying the spirit of oneness existing between Siva and Vishnu. So this hallowed Tali is a famous Hari Hara kshetra of eternal significance.

The temple conducts besides the regulars, special pujas, like the Namajapam every day in the evenings - repetition of the Lord's names. And Bhagavatha Saptaham once a year. The annual festival begins on the Vishu - the auspicious new year for Keralites. Its pageantry is of special kind and attracts lakhs of devotees from all over the country. The temple received purificatory ceremonies in 1967 after completing the renovation in 1966 necessitated by Tippu Sultan's spoilation and desecration during his military campaign. The untiring and devout efforts of the theist citizens are masterly directed and reviving the former glory of the temple which created new records in temple history.

Sure, it reaches the pinnacle soon.

KUMARANALLUR TEMPLE

About 3 km off Kottayam there lies this famous shrine dedicated to Lord Subrahmanya and Devi Parvathi. The origin of the Devi's taking her seat here is very odd. Strange that this temple bears resemblance to Madurai Meenakshi temple, and stranger to hear the priests are called Madurai Nambudis.

This is the beginning - once Mother Meenakshi's nose-ring was found missing. When it was reported the ruling Pandyan King, he ordered the execution of the priest without enquiry or trial. Hearing, the innocent priest fled for safety in the dead of night. As he was groping his way, there appeared a shaft of bright light and led him to this place as in the case of a bright star leading the wisemen of the East to Bethlehem at the time of Christ's birth. Soon after reaching this place, that shaft - no other than the Devi entered the temple, built for Lord Subrahmanya by Cheraman Perumal. Seeing the Devi taking seat in the temple meant for Lord Subrahmanya, the Cheraman decided to disgrace her by dislodging. Just then there enveloped thick fog and covered the whole town. So it was called Manchoor - means there by the place of a sheet of fog. Attributing this to Devi's act, the King consecrated her image in the temple, appointing 1000 persons, besides 28 Nambudri Illoms to conduct prayer services under the guidance of the runaway priest. He remodelled certain parts making the shrine resemble Madurai Meenakshi temple. The image of Mother made of Anjathakal - antimony sulphate instead of stone as found in all temples.

The temple celebrates Trikartika festival in the month of Vrischikam falling in Nov-Dec on an unprecedented scale. It was on this holy day, the Devi took her Karthika bath and performed several rituals on the bank of the pond with great ardour. The Principal deities of Vadakkunathan and Annapuram temples

standing on the compound wall watched the myriad splendours of the Devi engaged in worshipping and returning with her retinue to the temple. Her austerity pleased them most and hence their observation with unbounded zeal. So the priests then placed the Naivedyam on the walls of the respective temples. And since then this practice is continued. Has strangeness any limit? Are gods exonerated from it's grip?

TIRUVIL WAMALA

— THE SEAT OF RAMA & LAKSHMANA

UNIQUENESS

Rare is the unity in fraternity; rarer is the reciprocal equality in fraternity and rarest is the divinity in fraternity, but the mother Earth has produced such-a-one in one, lone, single, illustrious twain - Rama and Lakshman. So far one only. This inimitable adaṛsasahodaras, the immortal literary creations of that Mahamaneeshi Adivavi Valmiki proved greater and mightier than the physical offsprings of Dasaratha couple - visible combination five elements. The pen-craft thus confirmed its superiority over the product of the spirit and matter? Verily, the Rama-Lakshman twain, the divine characters raised their creator to the high heavens to outshine the celestial bodies created to lighting up the worlds. Rama's portraiture is such a monumental contribution to the creative faculty that the whole corpus of literature produced since then is paying glowing tributes through prostrations; for, that Yasasvi Valmiki left nothing for any hand to improve upon. Rama is the personification of virtue, as virtue should be. As man, ruler, son, brother, husband, friend and guide, he is unique of uniques. Superlatives express their inability to cover his myriad magnetic personality, exuding excellences from every pore of his body. Hence the justification of the claim that with the parting of lips to utter 'Ra' the first syllable of that sacrosanct name, all the sins take to flight, and by pronouncing 'Ma' the second syllable, the lips close tightly unwilling to allow any sin entering again. Ah! What a magic! How sacred!!

Lakshman his younger brother possesses, yet some other traits, none but he alone can stand comparison. If pithruvakya palana, Prajanuranjaka nṛipalana and Dharma nirati lived a splendid full life in Rama, Sodaradharma and chitta suddhi reached the acme of perfection in Lakshman. His immaculate exemplary

selfless fraternal affection finds no superiors, much less peers. Rarest, purest, noblest and holiest was the bhathruprema that spilled at his every step that made the soil sacred and parents adorable. Listen! When Rama decided to implement his father's word of a 14- year-exile; he came to the momentous conclusion of following him like the shadow, despite dissuasions from all sides. What a sense of duty! How much brotherly affection!! Will such sacrifice manifest again? Leaving his young comely loving wife and royal luxurious life, he embraced forest life, full of perils and constant hardships; did not eat a single meal throughout the 14-year period, according to one legend, and served the couple in the roles of friend, guide, sentinel, servant and what not.

For what, or under whose compulsion? None compelled, nor any superior office thrust upon him that onerous duty. It is impossible to imagine the success of Rama's self-banishment without Lakshmana by his side from start to finish. His eternal vigil and inseparable company acted as danger - proof armour and enabled Rama to materialise his wish. Little wonder it is that they must be given equal importance, identical approbation and veneration. Anything less tantamounts to either non-recognition or ill-comprehension. They are synonymyns, whose corresponding virtues, though not bear similitude, each completes what the other lacks. Like object and shadow, they are inseparable, and interchangeable, but exist in two indivisible individual bodies. They resent isolation, nor relish at separate existence. Each has his magnanimous entity. This, perhaps the chief object of enshrining the ideal brothers in one mahakshetra and building of two separate, individual independent shrines in one and the same complex, and what is more making provision for one circumambulatory path - Parikramana marga. Of course in several hundreds of thirthas and kshetras the images of Rama and Lakshmana are installed and adored, but rarely they are worshipped in two separate shrines, that too one beside the other. This is in consonance that Kerala's superiority and unique intellectual luminosity. To worship them in two independent shrines is a novelty! And an admirable one at it!! This ingenuity of Keralites merits adulation and emulation.

The temple at Tiruvilwamala is a standing monument of the highest spiritual evaluation, Kerala has achieved. And building one

beside the other like here, or one behind the other is their another innovative trait deserving emulation and instant implementation and to be sure, it pleases the deities worshipped too; for, no one is freed from egotism, however much altruism overflows their hearts. This sacred hill temple has many more plus points that set it apart from others; for it lies atop a hill, commanding colourful picturesque landscape around, heightened by spectacles of famous river Bharatapuzha flowing majestically at close quarters, and abundant growth of gorgeous tall trees at a distance. Besides this immense wealth of Nature, the temple's spiritual wealth bids instant devotion for it is enshrining a five-foot-high magnificent Hanuman image to the south of eastern gateway in the role of kshetrapalaka, safeguarding the spiritual wealth and growth of the temple; it is here Amalakan, the son of Kasyapa Prajapati turned the mischievous danavas into rocks and succeeded in making Mahavishnu present eternally; it is here the celestial architect Vishwakarma built a cave called Punarjanani for freeing mankind from the vicious circle of births and deaths; it is here Panchapandavas worshipped the brothers for attaining Sadgati, it is this temple deemed once as the richest among Kerala temples with one lakh paras of paddy as income from lands, it is to this deity several princes vied with one another in performing sevas with offering; it is here Mahavishnu taking the man-lion form - Narasimha killed an asura for polluting the precincts with bones of animals he had eaten; it is here Bilvamangalaswamy appeased the Lord's anger with stotras; it is in this temple Parasuram installed the image of Mahavishnu granted to him by Lord Siva and liberated his parents together with appointing tantris as personnel for management of the temple besides dwelling here for some time; it is this temple that was spared from attack by Tippu due to its location in his friend's territory.

Glorified thus by heavenly connections, sanctified by the rare archamurthis; worshipped by avatarapurushas; patronised by royal dynasties; enriched by munificent endowments; embellished by scenic grandeur of colourful Nature, eulogied in Puranas and itihasas, this mountain shrine is drawing the devotional community and liberating them from the Tretayuga onwards.

The Vilwadrimahatmya, a famous sanskrit treatise furnishing an elaborate account of this divya kshetra establishes the origin of Mulavirat. As the legend goes, Parasurama with a view to liberating his parents - Renuka-Jamadagni prayed to Lord Siva to helping him in the selection of spot for performance of pitrukarmas. Satisfied with the pious intention, Lord Siva appearing before, gave him the idol of Mahavishnu he was adorning since long and said that the place fit for the installation of this august image would be right place for conducting pitru Karmas. Taking the sacred image he set out in quest of right spot. Attracted by the myriad splendours of the lovely Amala trees surroundings the Vilwadri, he chose it for installation. Building a beautiful shrine befitting the august image, obtained from Lord Siva, he consecrated it with due rituals. And employed learned priests for the conduct of regular and occasional pujas. And then offered several elaborate ritualistic prayers for the liberations of parents. Gratified by the sanctity of the hill temple, he stayed here for sometime absorbed in various temple activities. The place of his settlement is now called Bhutan Mala. the image he installed is now worshipped in the Srikoil facing the east and it is Lakshmanamurthi.

The image in the adjoining Srikoil is called Srirama and it is Swayambhu self-born. The archamurthi is comparatively bigger and is fitted with permanent gold plated kavacha and is in two parts - the lower part covering upto waist and the upper one the rest, but joined at the waist dextrously that none discerns the joint. The belief goes that there is a cave below the Srikoil, where lies a golden vilwa tree. And on account of this also, the place is named Vilwamala.

RAMA APPEARING AS NARASIMHA

The legend further continues with the episode of a danava who entered the temple disguised as brahmin and brough havoc on the mild animals with a view to preventing the growing fame of it. It appears the glory of the Lord grew by leaps and bounds in a very short period of installation and adoration of the Mulavirat. With the unprecedented popularity of Lord, there arose doubts that the

demon race would be put down or annihilated soon. To desecrate this shrine and thwart further spread of glory, a certain asura came to this place and moved freely in the garb of a pious brahmin. He was not only participating in the ritualistic programmes, but enjoying feasts along with the brahmins regularly, fed by the temples. Wicked as he was, and intention being foul, he was eating cows and bulls belonging to the devotees living nearby and throwing the bones and horns in a corner. The heap that went on growing roused suspicion among the worriers who lost animals. Frightened people prayed to the Lord for rescuing them from this disaster. The Lord waited for a chance. And the end came when the fake brahmin entered the Srikoil one dark midnight in the month of Kumbha to destroy the sacred Swayambhu image. Lord Sritama assuming the Narasimha form tore the danavadhama to pieces. The uproar created by the dying danava awakened the people, and who on entering the Srikoil were terribly frightened at the sight of the archamurthi. At the juncture, the famous sage Bilwamangala Swamiyar appeared on the scene and appeased the anger of the Lord with several hymns eulogising the glory of Vilwadrinatha and his compassion. Before the prayers ended the Lord appeared in snataswarupa and received veneration through special prayers. There is a place now called Murikunnu-ox-hill standing as a testimony of the horns and bones heaped by that ruthless danava, which incidentally sheds light on the Lord's Omni-compassion shown to his adorers.

AMALAKAN EPISODE

The Swayambhu archamurthi now worshipped in the temple has a fantastic background and is associated with Amalakan-the devout son of Kasyapa Prajapati. The Purana reads thus - Amalaka desiring to lifting mankind from the samsarasagara through devotion did dirgha tapas here. Power mad Devendra presuming Kasyapa's motive for Devendrapadivi tried to foil it with the help of celestial nymphs - Rambha, Urvashi etc. His rock-like firmness did not allow any dent. He then approached Kasyapa to dissuading his son from that desire; Kasyapa acquainted him with the nobility of his son's penance for achanchala bhakti - unstinted devotion only and not for any transitory bhoga. Pleased with it, Devendra again enjoyed

peaceful nights. It has a strange reaction on the asuras. They understood that Amalaka was seeking the means for their end through Lord Mahavishnu's boons. So they resorted to Paisachaka knityas to frustrate it. For Amalaka, it was a child's play to annihilate them. He opened his eyes - there emerged then crackling sparks that developed into great conflagration swallowing the mischievous elements in their entirety. And their remains formed into a rock which is now going by the name in Rakshasapaara - demon rock, and is lying to the south west of the temple. Thoroughly pleased with his soul force, Lord Mahavishnu stood before him flanked by Sridevi and Bhudevi with Adishesha as canopy. Amalaka's eyes streamed joyous tears profusely; for it was a rare darsan and he expected for Lord's darsan only. When the Lord asked him to name his desire, he merely expressed lokodharana ideal first - freeing mankind from the never ending family worries by remaining here for worship by people and granting him the much-coveted boon of unstinted devotion - achanchala bhakthi. Overjoyed at his humanitarian objective, the Lord at once transferred his tejas to the archamurthi - Srirama, being worshipped till then. As Amalaka Maharshi used to chant the name of Rama while offering prayers do the deity in the Srikoil facing west, it is called Srirama's temple and so bhaktas utter Srirama while worshipping here, and Lakshmana while praying to the idol in the adjacent Srikoil facing east. Both are chaturbhujamurthis, adorned with the same weapons and are in standing postures exuding grace through their Santaswarupas. The Srikoils are also similar in constructional aspects, such as shape, height adornments etc.

THE TEMPLES

These holy twin shrines built atop the legendary Vilwadri can be accessible by road on the western side. They have certain odd features that set them apart from similar Vaishnava temples. The temple has no flag staff to begin with, a rarity, but it contains an unusually huge peepal tree grown majestically amidst rocks and is visible for miles and beckons the devotees coming from afar. A substitute for the Dwajasthambha, perhaps. Moreover there is no temple well, and has only a few minishrines inside the complex. At

the eastern entrance, there is a grand shrine dedicated to Hanuman. It has a five-foot tall imposing image wringing adoration by its size and pious anjali pose. He is also the guardian deity - Kshetrapalaka here. Visitors offering prayers here first proceed to the two Srikoils. These two are quadrangle in shape and built of rubble base. They are two-storeyed shrines, the lower part, a truncated pyramidal shape and the upper adorned with gabled roofs and shining Kalasas over the copper plated roofs. The Srikoils are prototype in construction but have a single Pradakshinamarga-circumambulatory path. Even in the archamurthis similarities are striking in their posture, pose, form etc., except the size - Srirama's image is slightly bigger than Lakshmana's. As the Lakshmana's image came into existence under extraordinary conditions on the unstinted devotion of spiritual luminary Bhargava Rama, and the other Srirama's being Swayambhu in addition to receiving Mahavishnu's tejas at the instance of Amalaka Maharshi, they are worshipped with unprecedented devotion. Moreover, this Tiruvilwamala shrine is deemed as the best and holiest among the three more dedicated to Srirama, others being Triprayar and Tiruvangad for Sriram, and the only one for Lakshmana at Venmamala near Kottayam. There are two more minishrines built for Ganapathi to the south. Down below this shrine there is a flight of stone steps leading the Hariharaputra shrine who is installed on a charming Vedika flanked by Siva and Parvathi. Except these, there is nothing that detains the visitors long.

THE PUNARJANANI CAVE

But this same holy kshetra is treasuring up another great spiritual wealth in a cave called Punarjanani lying at a distance of 3 Km. It is imbued with mystery and is casting eternal charm. It excites an inexhaustable thirst for visiting too. It is an artificial cave of a furlong in length, built by Viswakarma the celestial architect at the behest of Parasurama, while dwelling here after liberating his parents. This humanist Maharshi realising, that it is on account of sins only man is taking birth after death again and again, desired to reduce that number and give salvation. Accordingly he bade Viswakarma to build a long labyrinth in rock that ensures sure salvation by passing through it. With Viswakarma's touch, a long

cave like tunnel emerged with many ups and downs interspersed with dark and bright spaces along with its broad and narrow winding paths in the course of its one furlong distance. Indeed it is an ordeal to come for anyone out unscathed - without bodily bruises. Moreover, it is haunted throughout the year, except on Ekadasi falling in the Malayalam month of Kumbham, corresponding to Feb-March, when thousands of devotees pass through this cave with great enthusiasm. After coming out, they take bath in several adjoining thirthas such as Patala, Papanasami, kombu which are equally reputed for purging off sins. Tradition records that Pancha Pandavas passed through this on their visit.

Another reverential belief current in these parts is the famous river Bharatapuzha supposed to have been brought by Parasurama. It has many holy kshetras built on its banks, and it is as holy as the Ganges, and so called Dakshina Ganga. Among the five vaishnavate pilgrimage centres, Tiruvilwamala, Tiruchikkuzhi, Tirituala Tirunavayi and Tirumittakodu are famous. And Tiruvilwamala is compared to Manikarnika on the banks of Ganges.

FESTIVALS

Among several festivals celebrated with great eclat, Ekadasi festival takes precedence. It is a 12-day festival luring several thousands of devotees from all parts of the country. It is held in Kumbhamasa falling in Feb-March. Of the twelve days, Astami, Navami and Ekadasi have greatest pull and are the gala days in the annals of the temple history. The Vilakku-festival of lights, Nirmalas - decorations with flowers, elephant processions and grand feeding programmes are a class in themselves. In the past there used to be keen competition among the local chiefs to offer special pujas and distribute palpayasam, Ushapayasam to the visiting bhaktas. Maharajas of Trivandrum, Zamorins, kings of Cochin were vying with one another in booking number of sevās and spending huge sums. The audio-visual instruments then were turning this hill temple into Bhuloka Swarga. Renowned artistes entertained and are entertaining even today the asthika community with their honorable performances deeming the opportunity justifies their god-given gifts.

Soon after enshrining the Mahavishnu's image given by Lord Siva in the temple built by him, Parasurama appointed Six Illoms called Parasudayavars to look after the administrative activities of the temple. With joint consultations and cooperative efforts they carried on the day to day work helping the Tantris appointed to performing nithya naimithika pujas. Later the entire work was passed on to Perumbadappu and Neduviruppan - Cochin and Zamoran rulers. When feuds raised their ugly heads they referred this to the British for verdict. The foreign overlords bypassing the just legal rights of Zamorins, preferred the Cochin Maharaja Saktan Thampuran. This injustice, continued for sometime, but it did help both the adored and adorers including priests in a mysterious way. It happened during Tippu Sultan's military campaign of the keraladesa in 1789. The temple would have tasted the wrath of the iconoclast, but was spared, because he learnt at the nick of moment that it is situated in the dominion of Cochin, ruled by his best chum. Are not the ways of God mysterious? Does He reveal easily when and where lies the fortune of mankind? Not. Certainly Not. If he reveals, He is not God, nor mankind venerates that kind of God-head. Renovation taken up then gave face lift to many portions faded or fading. All was over with purificatory rites on one fine morning in 1861 AD. Alas! The same night Fire-god for some unknown reason swallowed the major portion. Images were somehow saved from devastating conflagration. God proved that his acts cannot be discerned easily. Later, renovation work was undertaken, but the arc could not make full circle; for the towers etc are yet to be completed. God alone knows when they will be up again! Now the temple is under the administrative control of Cochin Devaswom Board, peering as it were into the hearts of visiting devotees to making it appear majestically with its gopurams. When will that auspicious moment dawn?



LORD RAJARAJESWARA OF TALIPARAMBA

UNIQUENESS

Just think of the Lord of Mount Kailas, uttering either by the plain disyllabic word like ISA, or by the pompous decasyllabic, like Anda Pinda Brahmandadheeswara, there appears on the mental screen Lord Siva in his simplest, serene form of a nomadic ascetic, semi-naked body, smeared all over the chest with white ashes, head with matted-hair knotted on hands with Kapala and trident, justifying as it were, the role of eternal sentinel of burial ground, littered with burnt out faggots and broken pots etc. Ironically his whole frame exudes such beatitude that he can fittingly be called Sadanianda. Wherefrom does this sublime simplicity arise? He is Niradambara, and Smasanavasi although holding the most highest independent office like his two other counterparts Brahma and Vishnu. Sublimity seems bending its head in shame at the simplicity stationed in him. He is the very blessedness from whom springs up equanimity and tranquility. He resents ostentation and shuns pomp, the indispensable constituents of regality and exalted status. To keep himself off their glow and glitter, perhaps, he preferred the inaccessible and unforadable highest peaks for his residence. But to see him adorning dazzling diamond decked crown to match with the shimmering silks covering from throat to feet, staggers comprehension. The very thought seems absurd. It is fantastic and incredible. None reconciles with such form, nor readily approaches him for a look, much less adoration. But there is one holy place, where he is appearing as the emperor of emperors, and lo! is receiving imperial honours too. He is hailed as Rajarajeswara, and is exercising sovereignty unlimited. It is in the holy temple at Taliparamba. Needless to prolong that it is in Kerala. The genius of

Kerala has created several uniques and wrested many trophies in the realm of religion. This unique tradition tops the list of creditable innovations introduced in temple culture.

The temple at Taliparamba is quite unique in enshrining that compassionate incarnate in the form of Rajarajeswara and observing rituals befitting his exalted position. This temple, perhaps to be in tune with the status of the Lord and justify the honorific title, is putting in practice many of the imperial customs accompanying the majesty of his sovereignty. It is here scholars and literary men of great eminence were honoured as they are done by emperors, the patrons of arts and crafts; it is this temple's Lord that tendered Jnanopadesa to Sivayogi; it is to this temple Bhargavarama brought 15,000 brahmins for conducting uninterrupted pujas on the line of Agamas; it was this temple's priest who exercised spiritual and secular powers like Mahasamrat at it; it is this temple sanctified by Srirama's visit on his way back home with Sita; it is this place deemed the only holiest spot without cremation ground and hence the fittest to install the Sivalinga given to Mandhata by Lord Siva; and it is this place made sacrosanct with the three lingas given to different bhaktas by Lord Siva on three different occasions; it is this presiding deity observing mourning at the death of Zamorins since the Sayujyamukti attained by one Zamorin in the dim past; it is to this temple every pregnant woman comes to worship for the blessings of high status to the child to be born; it is here MOTHER Sati's head fell when Lord Mahavishnu cut her corpse, carried by Lord Siva after her self-immolation; it is this archamurthi who sent black cobra and hooded serpents to sacre away the soldiers of Tippu and bit the army chief who withdrew without further attack; it is here naaimrut offering is very popular; it is this temple that banned admission to women for worship during day and allows them after night puja and it is one of the Siva temples drawing theists since time immorial. It was called by two more names - Perinjellur and Lakshmipuram.

Consecrated by three Siva lingas, blessed by Lord Siva to the illustrious bhaktas of legendary and historical fame, patronised by intellectuals, having tendered Jnanopadesa to the deserving; set at nought the formidable iconoclasts by immobilising the army, and accepting only the royal honours, this temple's Mulavirat is luring the devotees since the Vedic times.

ANTIQUITY

Of the treatises embodying rich corpus of valuable information regarding the origin of this temple, Kerala Mahatmya comes in handy to reconstruct its former glory. The temple's sanctity originates from the holy head of Sati, and it was enriched by the three lingas given by Lord Siva at different times. So it dates back to the vedic times and begins in Kailas and ends at Dhaksha yagna. The highly conceited Dhaksha Prajapati, father of Sati and father-in-law of Lord Siva performed a great yagna with ulterior motives. He invited the Mukkti devathas except Lord Siva, despite being yagnabhokta - one entitled to receive the yagnapala by virtue of his position among the Trio. Lord Siva swallowed the dishonour. When Sati desired to attend the yagna, he refused permission showing valid reasons; yet Sati went to teach her father a lesson. She was humiliated in the presence of all gods. Infuriated Sati burnt herself in yogagni. Hearing the heart-rending news, he sent Virabhadra to destroy all. He too entered in his fiercest aspect and put to destruction to all that could be done to carrying the corpse of Sati. He started then Pralaya nritya when the cosmos fluttered threatening total collapse. Then Lord Mahavishnu appeared and cut the corpse with his Sudarsan so artfully that the bearer knew not the process. The dissected body fell at different places. The head of Mother Sati fell here and made the spot sacred; and later became a Saktipita of great importance.

After some centuries, one famous Sage Mandatha by name pleased the Lord with his deep penance. Giving him one of the three lingas, he presented to Mother Parvathi for worship, Lord Siva

advised him to install it at a place where there was no cremation ground. The sage after an intense search all over the land, came to Taliparamba and installed the Sivalinga as it fulfilled the condition laid down: He worshipped it ardently, and after his death the Linga disappeared mysteriously. Muchikund, his devout son propitiated Lord Maheswar and got another linga. This too vanished after some centuries. Satasoman, a famous king of Mushaka dynasty at the instance of Sage Agasya did penance and obtained from Lord Siva a linga on pleasing him with his austere tapas. He built a temple and installed. Thus the three lingas came to this sacred land.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF THE DEITY

The linga worshipped as Rajarajeswara then is the same linga now found in Srikoil and worshipped by the devotees although the temple built by the king underwent many changes. Centuries rolled by, but its fame waxed with each succeeding century. Srirama in the Tretayuga halted the Pushpaka Viman carrying him to Ayodhya with Sita and part to offering prayers to the potent Sivalinga. He prayed Lord Parameswar from the spot just opposite the archamurthi which lies now in Mukhamandapa, and called with the sacrosanct name of Namaskara Mandapam. To keep up its sanctity, no one is allowed to enter it. As the presiding deity is worshipped as Rajarajeswara, he is enjoying imperial status, conspicuously absent in many similar temples dedicated to Lord Siva. Rituals such as the offering of Naiamrit abhisheka to avail the darsan is a MUST here. It is in consonance with the belief that the Lord is the emperor of emperors. Aren't the people seeking the audience of the highest dignitary necessarily take with them some sort of present, like Phalam, Patram, Pushpam or thoyam? Normally none is allowed empty-handed. This convention fortifies the claim of the deity for imperial status. So every devotee to avail his darsan must necessarily place on the sopanas-temple steps a small pot of ghee which is available on payment of one rupee a pot in the temple office itself. The quantity of ghee thus obtained is used for lighting up the Srikoil

and other important parts. The practice magnifies the glory of the temple, besides dignifying the status of the Lord. This Lord of Lords according to belief, grants dignified status to the adorers; hence the practice of pregnant women coming invariably to the temple to offering prayers here. They are not disappointed. So the prospective mothers are pouring in to offering Naiamruta. Moreover, this supreme Lord is renowned for the patronage of literary men, like the earthly rulers. Talipramba was deemed a famous rendezvous of men of high intellectual brilliance. The scholars of repute were regularly honoured with titles, gifts, bracelets, shawls etc in a special mandapa called Kottumpuram lying to the left side of the Srikoil according to the merit of the work and status reached by the aspirants. Really, the honours conferred on the scholars acted as passport to enter an assembly anywhere, any time. Does it not signify the highest reputation the Lord enjoyed and mute submission to his verdict?

THE PRIESTS' AND THEIR GLORY

The priests too reposed implicit faith in the Lord and they defied the command of the earthly lords however superior and powerful they were. They were very proud of their learning and office. They never recognised the superiority of earthly power. Once they flatly turned down the Maharaja Marthanda Vimana's invitation, soliciting their participation in the Murajapam he started. They went to the extent of sending the reply clothed in vituperative language - "We are in the service of Rajarajeswara, and he is our supreme authority. We obey only perumtri kovilappan, but not any other! Their dedication and audacity merit whole-hearted appreciation and emulation. May their tribe increase! Sure, moving and breathing there round the clock in the temple of Rajarajeswara they could not but behave otherwise. They imbibed the imperial dignity and breathed out sovereignty. So everything here exudes royalty and inspires dignity, nay it begets in the immediate progeny and bequeathes to the distant posterity too.

THE TEMPLE

The sacred shrine though embodying several uniques, is neither huge in dimensions, nor rich in possession of properties. The temple property is indeed comparatively limited, although its spiritual superiority and imperial sovereignty are unmatched and unprecedented. Its inner grandeur outshines the outer adornments. It is modest in size, yet, possesses all the requisites. Although it has a modest prakara and gopuram, the courtyard is vast and the Srikoil too is extremely beautiful. The garbhagriha is quadrangular in shape and is surrounded by two roofs and the whole structure has a pyramidal roof. Just opposite this imposing Srikoil lies the Namaskaramandapa built with sloped roof and two projecting gables at the end. Here one finds certain oddities - this temple has no flag staff and the Srikoil is adorned with only one stupi, whereas the Namaskara mandap has three. The Balikal is roofless, but is embellished by a strange figure, with a stranger face evoking strangest guesses, if examined to fix its form. There stands in front of the balikkal a small rectangular building adorned with a pyramidal roof. And it is another oddity that greet the eyes.

THE ARCHAMURTHI

The Mulavirat representing Rajarajeswara is in the form of linga of about three feet in height. The decoration, particularly with phalanetra lends ethereal charms and heightens its dignity. The artful expert decoration of making the eyes prominently broad on either side of the well-cut nose heightens the grandeur of the image and gives a royal banquet to the eyes. None takes off his look instantly; but rivets his gaze and enjoys the thrills passing the spines at the grand sight of this Rajarajeswara. The resplendent charms of the Lord linger longer in the minds of the viewers, even after leaving the Srikoil. It beckons visits numerous and prayers multifarious. Indeed it inspired and ignited the slumbering creative instincts in eminent poets too. Thoroughly lost in the enjoyment of rare bliss,

the icon of Rajarajeswara radiating from his mesmerising beauty, one Uddanda Sastri a great poet fell into ecstatic raptures and composed marvellous poems on the spot. His rhapsody reflects the infinite joy he experienced at the sight of that captivating icon. Though this Nirugunopasaka used to stand and see every archamurthi in the temples visited, he never either joined his palms nor uttered a single word in praise. This Rajarajeswara not only raised his hands in veneration, but opened his mouth in composition of verses in his praise. Prostrations to O Rajarajeswara for teaching the superiority of Sagunopasana over Nirgunopasana. His imperial majesty bends the unbendable thus, but never it bent to any.

THE LORD MOURNS THE DEATH

This august deity liberated many upasakas as evidenced by the merging of one Zamorin in the Lord. The Zamorin prayed for Sayujyamukti; and it was granted anon. The Lord has a soft corner for genuine devotees. He undergoes tortures and even forsakes luxuries for their well being. Like kith and kin he observes mourning at the death of the true bhaktas. There is a practice prevalent even now that whenever an elder Zamorin dies, it must be reported to the Lord. He observes mourning with due rituals. Ah! what a kinship between the adorer and adored! The grateful bhaktas remember him on auspicious occasions and offer their mite. The Maharajas of Travancore being devout bhaktas, offer an elephant to the Lord, whenever a coronation for a new king is made, or on their visit to the temple. Should not royalty pay obeisance to the sovereignty in the fittest manner? Moreover, in deserving cases the Lord initiates the devotees into the mysteries of bhakti, and at times tenders jnanopadesa to the meritorious. Pleased with the highest spiritual evolution of one Raghava^{nda}, popularly known as Sivayogi this Lord tendered Jnanopadesa. A rarity! This divinity thus embodies several uniques that establish his spectacular sovereignty and it is living upto the name of Rajarajeswara given to him. The Lord's sports too are many and mysterious too. He renders timely

help to the adorers. He is asritaparigata to the core. Genuine prayers are being answered, and the redress too is granted to many whose number is legion. During the ruthless attack on the temple by Tippu's army: some of the Priests remaining in closed doors of the garbhagriha, prayed earnestly with moist eyes to save them and the temple from destruction. Moved by their soul-searing appeals, the Pannagubhushana released his serpent. Soon there were serpents everywhere. Those black cobras with outspread hoods crawling all over with hissing noise and dilating fangs struck death to the soldiers at mere sight. The Chief was bitten, and so they ran in pell mell. Further damage was stopped and devotion triumphed. Would any stand against that imperial sovereignty? Most of the lily livered, half baked Nambudri priests having faith neither in God nor in themselves left for safer places then.

FESTIVALS

Mahasivaratri and Vishu - are the two annual festivals, the temple celebrates with pomp and splendour. Each lasts for a day only. No festival lasting over and above 24 hours was ever conceived or celebrated. Another novelty! Another strange practice is the admission of women after the athaza - night pooja, the reason being that the Lord liberally grants the desire of women when he is in the company of Parvathi after the day's work. During day times no lady is permitted to avail darsan.

Would the sports of the Lord be understood easily?



LORD KRISHNA OF TRICHAMBRAM

PREFACE

Temple traditions are many and varied. They are not uniform, nor do they change with the march of time. Most of them are inducted along with the consecration of archamurthis by spiritual men of great fame. Some are by the godmen who visit and worship the deities with special conventional practices. Acharyas and priests introduce a few to effecting localisation of the divinities and making the temples more popular, and deities adorable. Celebrated theists who attain Sayujyaprapti - merging with gods, also leave behind a few practices which become the much hallowed traditions in course of time. Whoever might be the person, or whatever the condition, or whenever commenced, they exert great impact on the adorers and change their outlook; for, they are imbued with divinity. The mysticism that embodies them, impel instant veneration. That mysticism as a matter of fact lives in them, nay lives by them. Some of them are very queer and so mystify any reasoning, but viewed in the light of the events from which they emanate, they become acceptable and adorable, even though they are contrary to the accepted conventions. Their queerness in course of time becomes the principal reason of their attraction for visitation. And forms unique feature exercising eternal fascination for regular visits and devout prayers. Among many such traditions observed, the Trichambaram Krishna temple has a few that are really exciting and fantastic.

UNIQUENESS

Of the odd traditions prevailing here, the offering of Naivedyam to the deity immediately after opening the temple doors in the mornings merits mention. Queer it is that the deity is allowing the practice without hesitation or objection. He rather likes it, because he is so hungry that he accepts and admits not elaborate rituals, when the belly is empty. Marvellous tradition! It is here the deity is carried on the heads of priests instead of elephants; it is here exists the prohibition of elephants for any function rather resenting their movements in and out of its precincts; it is this temple that continues the practice of Nrittam at the house of a devotee after death; it is this temple first built by Parasuram and is implementing all the rituals and Utsavas as stipulated by him without changing; it is this that the Mushaka dynasty patronised and endowed it with munificent gifts in several forms, besides renovation several times; it is this temple famous for treasuring up excellent wood carvings; it is here a tree called Ilanju tree stopped bearing fruit to protect a bhakta doing prayers under its shade, and it is to this temple, the idol of Balarama is brought in procession during the annual festival from Dharamukulangara, a nearby town.

Famous for following several hallowed traditions, patronised by royal dynasties, built by Bhargavarama, eulogised by saint-seers and sanctified by the penance of Sabara Maharshi, this popular temple is exercising great fascination over thousands of bhaktas since the Dwaparayuga.

ANTIQUITY

The legend takes us back to the earliest times when primeval forests enjoyed their heyday - everywhere tall green trees gave eternal shade to the Mother Earth by the sumptuous growth of thick foliage, preventing even the penetration of a single ray of the Sun through them. Then a renowned sage by name Sambara attracted by

the bounteous beauty of Nature and divinity of land, came here and did penance for years, propitiating Mahavishnu. When God asked him to mention his desire, he simply uttered Sayujyamukti - merging in God, and that alone releases man from the vicious circle of births and deaths. Thoroughly pleased with the highest evolution of his soul, God granted it anon. Though the sage attained oneness with God, his ethereal presence was felt by people and they were enjoying tranquility whenever they visited the spot, where the temple stands now. Once when Parasurama visited this place, he had a strange experience - he had a soulifting vision of Lord Krishna after Kamsavadha. It was quite exulting and enchanting, for Krishna appeared in all his splendour after the Jagadoharanakarya killing of dushta Rakshasa Kamsa. So his rapturous joy overflowing his whole frame, as it were. Soon Parasurama decided to perpetuate that jubilant mood of darsan and adoration by humanity through an image. A master sculptor was engaged. The artistry of the sculptor commissioned reached the consummation point with the depiction of that happy mood in the archamurthi. Parasurama was pleased and consecrated it in the temple built then. And it is the same image which is giving darsan to the visiting public. Credit goes Parasuram for installing this rarity for worship. He then stipulated elaborate injunctions for the conduct of nitya naimithika Prayer services. Later, the Mushakavamsa rajas endowed the temple with several gifts, and renovated it several times. Among them king Vallabha II, and Srikantha surnamed Rajadharma deserve particular mention. They spent lavishly and patronised sculptors and artists on a scale that provoked jealousy among his contemporaries. In the succeeding centuries many royal families renovated it from time to time and the sculptural styles preserved are enabling the archeologists to fix the periods of construction, renovation etc.

THE TEMPLE

The small but sublime shrine of Trichambaram comparatively, was compared to a rose by a great devotees, for its special spiritual

fragrance emanating from its hoary antiquity. The singularity of this shrine lies in its plan. The Srikoil is square in shape and has a huge mandapa just in front of it. The two-storied main shrine is adorned with a projecting gable on the front of the lower roof. The pyramidal roof has four projecting gables and a shining Kalasam atop. The walls of the Srikoil are beautified with mural paintings and wood carvings. They illustrate several episodes from Bhagawata and other scriptures. Another worth seeing object in the campus is the Durga shrine built in the central part of a pond lying to the north of the main entrance. The tank is held in high esteem; for, it has mystical powers. It never goes dry - the water level remains same in all seasons. The thirtha is holy and people are prohibited from using it either for bathing or washing. The loveliness of this little pushkarini increases in the nights when it reflects the oil lamps lit around the temple. For availing this spectacle devotees prefer visiting it in nights. An Ilanji tree lying on the south side of the tower is imbued with mystical powers. It tells an interesting story and bends the heads of the visitors. Incidentally it focuses light on the sanctity of every object exuding divinity and the Lord's infinite mercy for his bhaktas. According to the word current here, once a man afflicted with an incurable skin disease came here and started praying to Lord for cure, when every doctor tried and failed. Being a man of great faith in God, he used to sit on the platform beneath that Ilanji tree for meditation from the opening of the temple doors to the closing till late in the night. He did this for long. One day a fruit from the branches fell on him and he was upset terribly. Then he complained to the Lord as to why he did not shower blessings on him - cure his ailment. He wailed bitterly due to pain. The Lord heard; soon there was a miracle. He was cured. More than that the tree stopped bearing fruit. Why? How could a tree worry a true devotee? Should it go-scot-free? No. Lord Krishna held the scales even. Isn't non-bearing a sin? Yet, it is this tree that liberated that bhakta, hence during the temple festival the priest carrying the Utsavamurthi on his head dances round the tree in token of obeisance. It is at this time, devotees keep a ring on a leaf before the

spot of salvation and offer prayers, presuming that Lord would lift them from difficulties as he did in the case of that bhakta.

ARCHAMURTHI

This august Mulavirat is made of stone, and he flashes lustrous smiles reflecting the inexplicable inner joy at completing the task for which he was born. This jubilant aspect indeed hypnotised the beholders and bends their heads in veneration unknown to themselves. This particular mood prevailed in him not because he killed Kamsa, but the liberation he granted to his grand father Ugrasena and parents Devaki and Vasudeva. Moreover, his joy at killing the renowned wrestlers and royal elephant too was emerging from every point of his Jaganmohanarupa. Hence it is by all counts supreme, peerless and measureless. That joy is depicted in all its splendour by the stone cutter at the instance of Bhargavarma. Hence an irresistible attraction to all. At all times. This belief is ratified by two more evidences found here. The Lord's joy was so infinite that it transcended all the limits and restrictions, the age-long traditions prescribed for proper moulding of mind. The custom of offering Naivedyam to the Lord soon after opening the doors in the morning is in contradiction to the prevalent one in temples all over the land. After elaborate rituals lasting for hours, naivedyam is offered and that marks the close of further rituals. But here the priests offer without attending to even the Nirmalya ritual. Why? The Lord's hunger was so keen and filling the stomach was so demanding that did not like delay, nor stand formalities. Has not he exhausted all his superabundant energy in killing the elephant, wrestlers and formidable Kamsa? So the practice is praise worthy. Another! Prohibition of elephants in the premises. The Lord developed resentment for elephants, the movement the royal elephant charged him at the instance Mohut, of course, by Kamsa in fact. If any pachyderm appears, it bites the dust invariably. Here is an incident that bears testimony to this.

HOW A MUSLIM WAS HUMBLLED

Once a Muslim on buying hefty elephant desired to display him wealth and valour to the people living around the temple. He started riding it much against the objections of the people. And lo! with a great bang the temple doors were opened and an ear-splitting roar was heard. The elephant's front legs were bent involuntarily, and it fell down throwing the Muslim off. Rising wise, he made amends by offering prayers to the Lord. These two events, reinforce the belief that the archamurthi depicts that jubilation which overflowed him after Kamsasamhar.

FESTIVALS

The 15-day annual festival of the Lord falls in the month of Kumbha corresponding to Mar-Apr. The star attraction during this festival is the bringing of the idol Balarama from Dharamkalangra lying 6 K.M. off this shrine. And the brothers enjoy the dance performed by the priest carrying Utsavamurthis on their heads. The Nrityam starts at nights throughout the period at Pookothunada a place on the main road lying at two furlongs off this temple. A legend illustrates the origin of this event and focuses light on Lord's infinite mercy for his devotees. In the beginning there were brahmin houses here, and the scene of Nrityam performed now, formed a part of the courtyard of Nambudri house belonging to Pookathillam. An ardent woman devotee lived here who was visiting the temple regularly to offer butter as naivedyam to Lord for years. When she grew sufficiently old, she could not go to the temple and do offering butter and prayers. Moreover, she missed witnessing of the Nrityam too. She was so weak physically, but spiritually too strong. So she prayed to the Lord and expressed her misfortune of not seeing Nrityam through streaming eyes. It was genuine. The Lord listened and was moved. So, unknown to themselves the dancers made their way to the vast courtyard of her house and danced to the contentment of the old devotee. How fortunate: Is not the Lord the

celestial-wish- yielding tree-Kalpavriksha! No devotee despairs, if he once soulfully prays and surrenders to the Lord's will. Thence forward the practice of performing Nrittam here on the barren ground is continued. Centuries may roll by, men may come and men may go but the flow of Bhagawans Karuna, if starts moving, goes on eternally, ecstatically and infinitely. Is it the earthly river to flowing with sands during the non-monsoon season?

Seeing is elevating. Visit and get literated.

KALADI — SANKARACHARYA

This tiny Kerala Village enshrines many relics testifying to the association of Jagadguru Sankaracharya, the pre- eminent saint philosopher of all times. By timely propounding of Advaita Vedantha - the dominant philosophic school of Hinduism, he salvaged the sanathana dharma from the claws of atheistic dragons and polytheistic hydras. This sacred place, once the haven of devout Nambudris has now carved out a covetable niche in the spiritual history of India by turning itself out into a world renowned, centre for spiritual inspiration and religious initiation; for, it is here the famous acharyas of the four maths congregate often to embarking upon great missions for Viswasanthi, and it was here that great Adi Sankara was born to Aryamba and Siva guru - the pious Nambudri couple as a result of their devout prayers to Vadakkunathan of Trichur.

This child prodigy besides mastering all the holy scriptures in a trifle of three years performed many miracles to the wonderment of literates and illiterates. Among them changing the course of river Purna and bringing it very near to his house for enabling his aged mother to bathe daily is seen even today. It also possesses the very same family temple of Sri Krishna, where his ancestors worshipped some twelve hundred years ago.

The religious renaissance that followed has done yeoman services to this great son of India by erecting monumental memorials, which by their sublimity and loftiness are luring the religionists and tourists through out the year. The tall eight-storeyed Adisankara kirthi sthambham that came up recently, seems broadcasting to the world the glory of his life. Among the other worth seeing memorials the Ramakrishna asram; the ancestral temple of Sankara; the samadhi of Aryamba deserve reverent mention and indispensable visitation.

The principal shrine dedicated to Sri Sankaracharya is run by Sringeri Math. It has two sublime shrines within its complex - one for that universal genius - Sankara and the other for Mother Sarada - the Patron Goddess of learning. Both are fittingly adorned architecturally and spiritually. There lies adjacent, the office of the Sankara Memorial Trust doing meritorious work for the promotion of spiritual, educational activities, aimed at perpetuating the memory of Sri Sankara. Kalady embody all these holy places of unique spiritual significance lies at a distance of 45 km from Cochin. So accessible by plane, train, bus and other means of transport either from Cochin or from Trichur.

TIRUVANGAD PERUMAL TEMPLE

UNIQUENESS

Of the three renowned shrines dedicated to Rama, the temple at Tiruvangad has several plus points that highlight the most covetable and zealously guarded exemplary traits of Srirama, making him the Polestar among the rulers of all times, and the darling ~~Love~~ to generations of people since his birth. This celebrated Raghukulabhushan, besides being the first and last word in the virtues of Pitruvakyapalana and righteous rule was a veritable Kalpadruma to the genuine devotees and pradyakalarudra to the unjust arrogant persons. As praised, he turned himself into an impregnable black granite while dealing with the hardened, remorseless persons, and becomes most soft, supple, pliable creamy hearted to the men of virtue. It is this temple that records with dates and facts, his magnanimity and ferocity that manifested themselves on occasions and proved spectacularly the Omnipresence of his Omnipotent divinity. This temple further testifies to the fact of oneness between Siva and Vishnu. Among the merits it possesses, an unusually big Pushkarini-a big tank occupying about two acres and the only temple in Kerala state having brass pagoda, covered with brass sheets instead of tiles merit mention. Moreover, this temple enshrines Bhagawati, who demonstrated her powers - both malevolent, benevolent, and now kept indicate for malignant acts she did once. Although this Rama temple like its counterparts has the four armed Mahavishnu image as the archamurthi, it is here only it goes by the name of Perumal Koil.

SOURCES

The glory of this shrine is elaborately described in sacred scriptures in several languages, besides Government records-Kerala Mahatmayam in Sanskrit, Keralotpati in Malayalam, Malabar Manual in English and devotional literature are embodying a great corpus of valuable information right from the days of Agasthya to the present day. The works of art, critics too shed enough light on the architectural marvels, making this into a worth seeing holy temple of eternal importance.

ANTIQUITY

The legend takes us to the glorious days of Sage Agasthya, when devadanava manavaṣ moved and lived in peace at times and peril always. The Sthalamahatmyam records that this famous temples was built by Swetarshi and the archamurthis were consecrated both by Neelarshi and Swetarshi. In the dim past, the region was under the constant dread of two indomitable hunters called Neela and Sweta. They used to taunt the innocent travellers day in and day out. It so happened they indulged in demonical acts of teasing the Sage Agasthya and his disciples on their way to river Cauvery for a bath one day. Annoyed with their pranks, the sage cursed them sorely. Realising the gravity of their offence, they appealed to his merciful forgiveness. Taking pity, he advised them to perform penance in Siva temples. Their penance and penitence were rewarded with boons by Lord Siva. So they decided to build temples at the places where they were liberated-the place where Neela did penance went by the name of Neeleswaram and that of Sweta's penance called Swetaswaram. Sweta built two temples-one for Lord Siva and the other for Vishnu, his istadaivam, now called Rama temple. Here in the same campus, he built another shrine for Lord Siva just to appease the fierceness of Lord Siva he installed first. Hence there are three temples lying side by side within one and the same vast prakara. The Siva shrines facing each other are lying on

the north side of the temple - one is known as Vadakkedam and the other Kizhkedam. There is another version attributing Neela's building of a Siva temple at Tiruvangad, in addition to the one he built at Neeleswaram. Thus Tiruvangad became a centre for the worship of Siva and Vishnu.

THE TEMPLE

This sacred shrine is very extensive and occupies about six acres of land. It has a massive prakara and within it lie three shrines along with many minishrines and mandapas. In the vast courtyard outside the Srikoil there is a minishrine for Hanuman, called appropriately the junior assistant of Lord Hari, since Garuda is accorded the honorific title of senior personal assistant for remaining with Sri Mahavishnu always. The shrines of Subrahmanya and Ganapathi are lying to the South of Srikoil. Another deity that wrings veneration here is the Porkali Bhagawati lying in the wooden cage for a strange reason. It appears, she was seen restlessly moving about during the nights and was causing fear among the people visiting the temple, and people living nearby. The priests confined her to a wooden cage by a powerful mantra. Does this not divulge the potency of the mantra and the limitations of the deities? This Bhagawati was ardently worshipped by artists and royal families prior to this incident and went by the name of Vaageeswari - the patron deity of Learning; and was held in high esteem.

THE EPISODE OF BHAGAWATI

Here is an anecdote that illustrates her benignity to the adorers. She was blessing the Kalaradhakas in several ways and was always at their beck and call. The story goes that once a certain Marar drew, one of the priests into a strange contest. This marar was an expert drummer, besides being an ardent devotee of Bhagawati. He said that he would make Bhagawathi appear before them with playing 'pani' a kind of drum held very sacred. The priest

unwittingly said that he would offer special naivedyam, if she were to appear as said. Being an efficient instrumentalist he played to such perfection that the Goddess did appear to enjoy the drumming, but the priest found himself at wits end - no time to cook the rice for naivedyam. So he offered uncooked rice as naivedyam due to the exigency. Lo! she was pleased beyond measure and accepted it. Since then only the uncooked rice is offered to the deity. She proved herself thus extremely generous, but her reckless roaming ended in imprisonment. Are gods exonerated from sins? No. Never. The scales are always kept even by Dharma Devatha.

ARCHAMURTHI

The presiding deity although called Srirama, is a replica of Mahavishnu, the common pattern found in Kerala temples. It is adorned with four arms, holding conch, disc, mace in the three arms and the fourth arm is revealing the abhaya mudra. Tradition says that Srirama assumed the very same form at the time of annihilating Khara and his demon hordes in the Dandakharanya. This belief is fortified by the disappearance of the actor playing the role of khara during the play called 'Khara Vadham' once played here. The actor who acted most superbly - rather lived in what role, feared the consequences of his further stay and vanished. Since then Khara Vadham is not stayed here. As the Lord of Tiruvangad is exceedingly merciful and liberal in granting boons, he is popularly known as Perumal.

The architectural beauty of this temple is one of supreme type. This two storeyed Srikoil is rectangular in shape. It has copper plated roof. The walls around the Srikoil are embellished with several images of the principal pouranic characters. And they are enhancing the imposing dignity of the architectural designs marvellously well. The mukhamandapa is adorned with wood carvings, depicting many episodes from the Ramayana. The craftsmanship, harmonising the idealistic glory with artistic beauty is peeping out from every frame. It won the highest tributes from the

world renowned art critics, who unequivocally praised the temple as the treasure house of arts.

HISTORICITY

The temple enjoyed uninterrupted unlimited sway since its inception - the administration was carried on without friction of any kind, due to implementation of well established traditions and agamic injunctions. But the trouble erupted in the eighteenth century, exactly in 1750 when the combined forces of Kolathunad, Kottayam and Kaduthanad invaded Tellucherry fort, disgusted by the wicked manoeuvres of Dorril, the British officer. They succeeded in capturing several strategic points including Tirunangadi and it was freed from the foreign menace for some time. But trouble came when Haidar Ali marched his army in 1766 into North Kerala and occupied Chirakkal. The frightened people along with royal family took refuge in the temple. All were safe. Did not Rama extend asylum to Vibhusan? Would Saranarthas be ever left in the lurch?

THE MIRACLE OF EASTERN TOWER

Later, when Tippusultan's thirst for expansion led him to this part of Kerala, it tasted his fury. The Prakara, Gopuram etc. came to ground level. Destruction fortunately could not go beyond that; for, it is believed that when the army made the Eastern gopuram as its target a big bullet from the temple came and hit the very same canon that fired and immobilised it. Poor Tippu, fearing the divine wrath made a shameful retreat. What is he after all, before the Omnipotent, who floored Dasakantha, the lifter of Kailas mount? The place where from Tipppu fought is now known as perum porkalam - a standing historic evidence of Srirama's invincibility and successful dushtasikshana. The very spot is used for the Pallivetta - the hunting ground for the deity during the annual Utsavam.

THE EXPERIENCE OF AN ENGLISHMAN

Now comes the proof of Srirama's boundless compassion for bhaktas which transcends man-made distinctions, like caste, religion, race, region etc. After several years of Tippu's humiliating retreat, there came here one British Officer by name Thomas Harvey Baber. He was an English man with a difference. He used to respect the traditions of the people, he ruled over. Once he was galloping fast on his horse before the temple. All on a sudden, the horse came to a sudden stop - it was immobilised - could go neither forward or backward. Illumination dawned upon him that his indifference to Lord Srirama was the cause of this mysterious phenomenon. He made amends by offering special pujas and turned into a great Sri Rambhakta like that of Vibheeshana later. This spotlights Srirama's boundless grace for bhaktas and justifies the claim of the epithet - Karunaikasin^{du} applied to him. He is Dharma and Dharmadevata too emulated him. Thus this temple is supremely famous for demonstrating to the world his ennobling virtues of asritarashana and dushtasikshana. And Lo! they are inscribed in gold on the glittering pages of history; so neither can they be contradicted, nor erased by begots or atheists.

Another colourful feather that the temple proudly displays is the traditions of patronage it extended to literary luminaries on the Tiruvonam asterism in Makara masa falling in Jan-Feb. On this auspicious day, Pattattanam is conducted by the temple authorities, of course, aided by the munificence of royal families. Vidwatasabhas, Kavyagostis - literary contests, forums etc were conducted on grand scale in the past, but bow only in a modest way due to change of trends in the governing bodies.

FESTIVALS

The annual festival begins on the auspicious Malayalam New year - Vishu called Sankaraman day, which falls on 14th April every year. It lasts for seven days with usual elephant processions, special

pujas, Bhuta bali - offering oblations to various alters etc. Entertainments with modern audiovisual aids raise the glory of the Lord to the skies, perhaps to acquaint the celestials with the activities going on here. During then the offering of Kalabam - smearing the Lord with sandal paste i.e. Chandanalanakra is made invariably to the deity. It is a feast to eyes. And people from far and near throng to avail this special feature. Aval offerings to Pavanputra Hanuman is common here. It has many more special attractions for which bhaktas in lakhs visit this temple, hence the belief in Northern India that there is no need for southerners to visit northern parts at any time; for, all the spiritual wealth is treasured up there in this temple here. They can attain bliss by making offerings to this Lord without going anywhere.

Does not such spiritual eminence masmerise the true devotees?

Visit it anon! Be profited soon!!

SRI SUBRAHMANYASWAMY TEMPLE - HARIPAD

This popular Subrahmanyswamy temple located very close to the Cengannur temple is the most reputed Murugan temple in Kerala. And the oldest too. According to legend this icon was adored ardently by Parasuram. So it bears many vestiges of his magnetic touch. It is one of the biggest temples possessing the beautiful image of Lord Subrahmanya, with four hands.

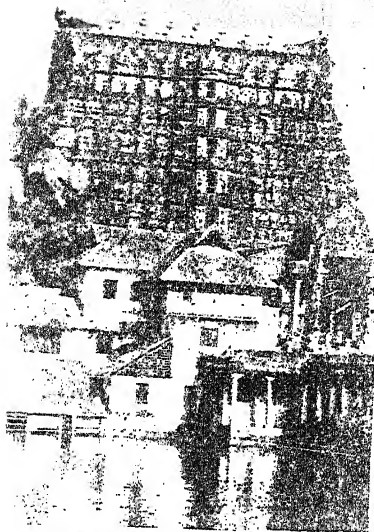
It was built under strange circumstances imbued with mystery. It has many plus points like the celebration of boat race, deemed a great national festival, when the enthusiasm of the people reach the apex; performance of Kavadiyattam etc., to speak a few. It came into existence owing to a strange dream of a virtuous bhakta. It so happened that a pious devotee dream one day that a beautiful icon was lying on a river-bed and it had to be installed in a temple with agamic rituals soon. On waking up, he informed this strange news to the elders. The astrologers and scholars delighted at it, at once set out in search of it. Enchanted by its scantity, they consecrated it in a temple fitting to its stature, and sanctity.

Later many festivals common to Murugan temples were introduced. Avani, Chitra, Karthik, Tai, Dhanu masas see the temple at its best with geity and polity reaching the zenith

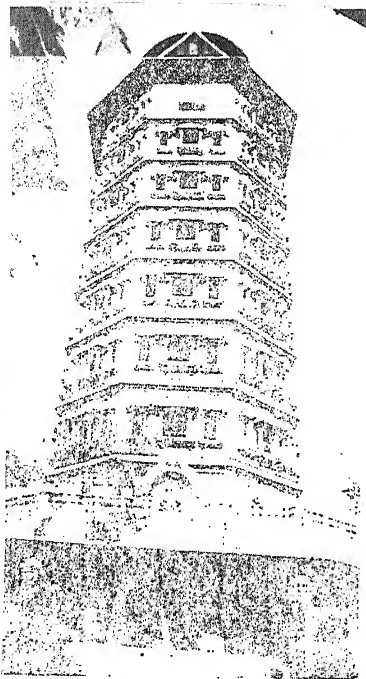
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2.	Changanur	-do-	Tiruvalla	Aleppy/Mannasala
3.	Aranmula	-do-	-do-	Erumeli/Tiruvalla
4.	Ambazhapuzha	-do-	-do-	Aleppy/Chenganur
5.	Sabarimalai	-do-	Kottayam	Achankori/Erumeli
6.	Ettamanur	Ernakulam	Ettamanur	Kuduthurthi/Vaikom
7.	Vaikom	-do-	Vaikom	Udayanapuram/Kumarnallur
8.	Chottanikara	-do-	Chottanikara	Ernakulam/Idukki
9.	Kodungallur	-do-	Irinjalakuda	Alwaye/Kaladi
10.	Irinjalakuda	-do-	Irinjalakuda	Triprayar/Trichur
11.	Triprayar	-do-	Triprayar	Trichur/Angamah
12.	Trichur	-do-	Trichur	Shoranur/Triprayar
13.	Guruvayur	-do-	-do-	Palghat/Shoranur
14.	Kozhikode	-do-	Kozhikode	Balusseri/Badagara
15.	Tiruvilwamala	Manglore	Tiruvilwamala	Palghat/Trichur
16.	Taliparamba	-do-	Tellichery	Cannanore/Badagara
17.	Trichambaram	-do-	-do-	Badagara/Cannanore
18.	Trivangad	-do-	Cannanore	Tellichery/Badagara



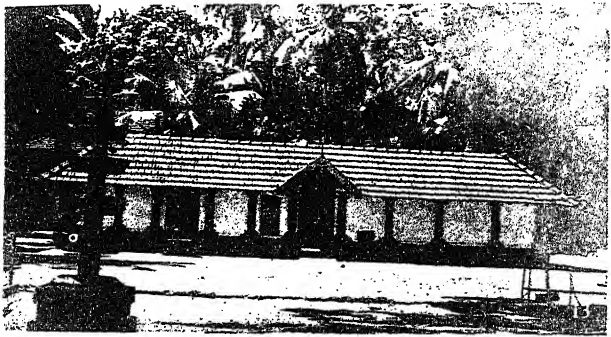
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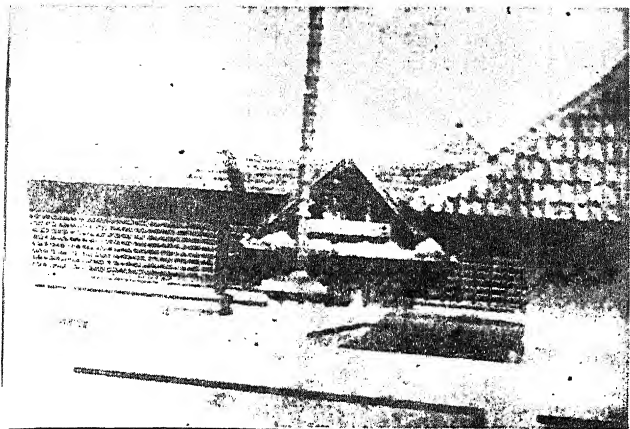
Padmanabha swamy Temple
Munirabadi



Sankaracharya 8-storeyed
Kirthi Mandir - Kalady,



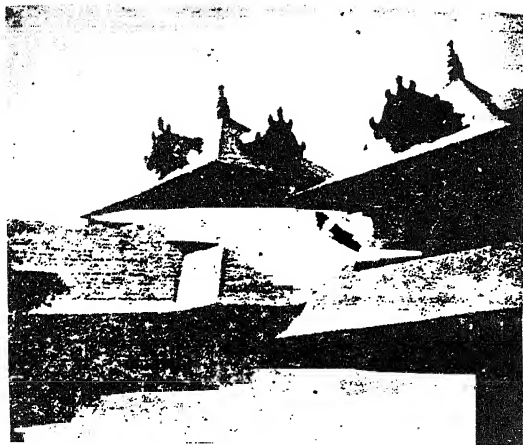
Venkatachalapathi koi - Guruvayur



Tali Temple - Calicut,



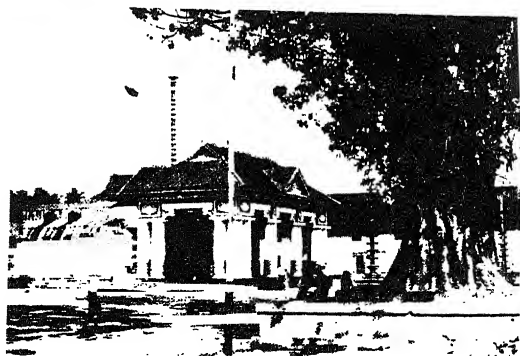
Sri Krishna Temple - Guruvayur



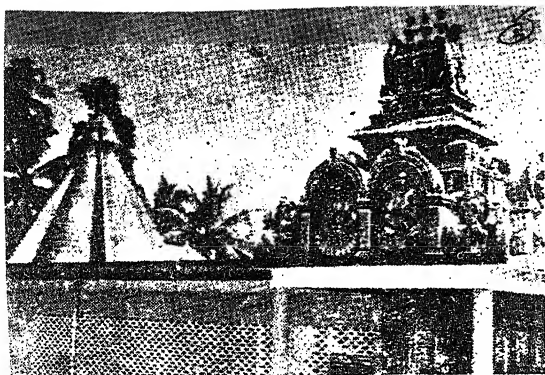
Rame Lakshmana Temple - Tiruvilwamala.



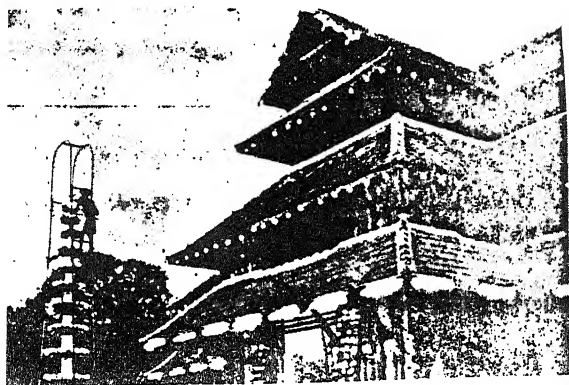
The Chengannur Bhagawathi Temple



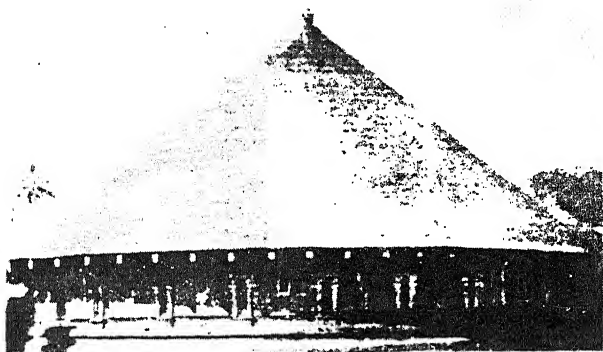
Siva Temple - Vaikom

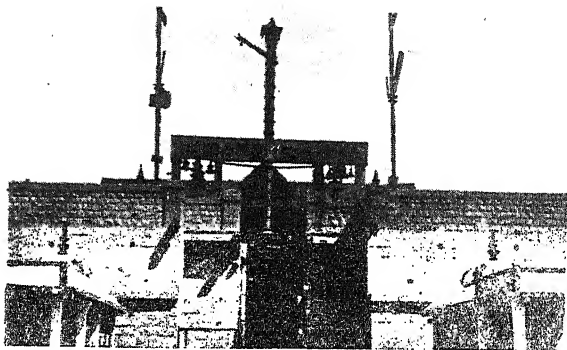


Sankaracharya Temple - Kelady

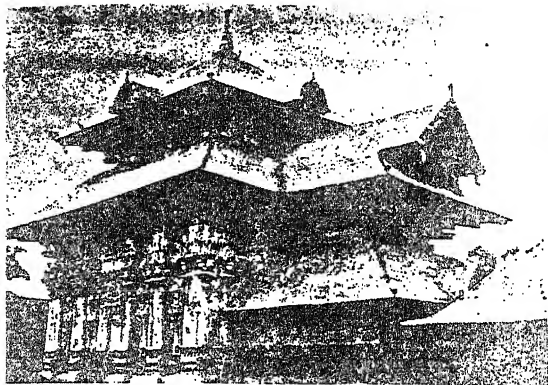


Vadakkunthar Temple Trichur (General view)





Padinettussac - Sabarimalai



Ramo Temple - Trichur



Pooram - Trichur